

# briarpatch

FIERCELY INDEPENDENT

## DIY TRANSITIONS

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accessing gender-affirming healthcare  
on their own terms

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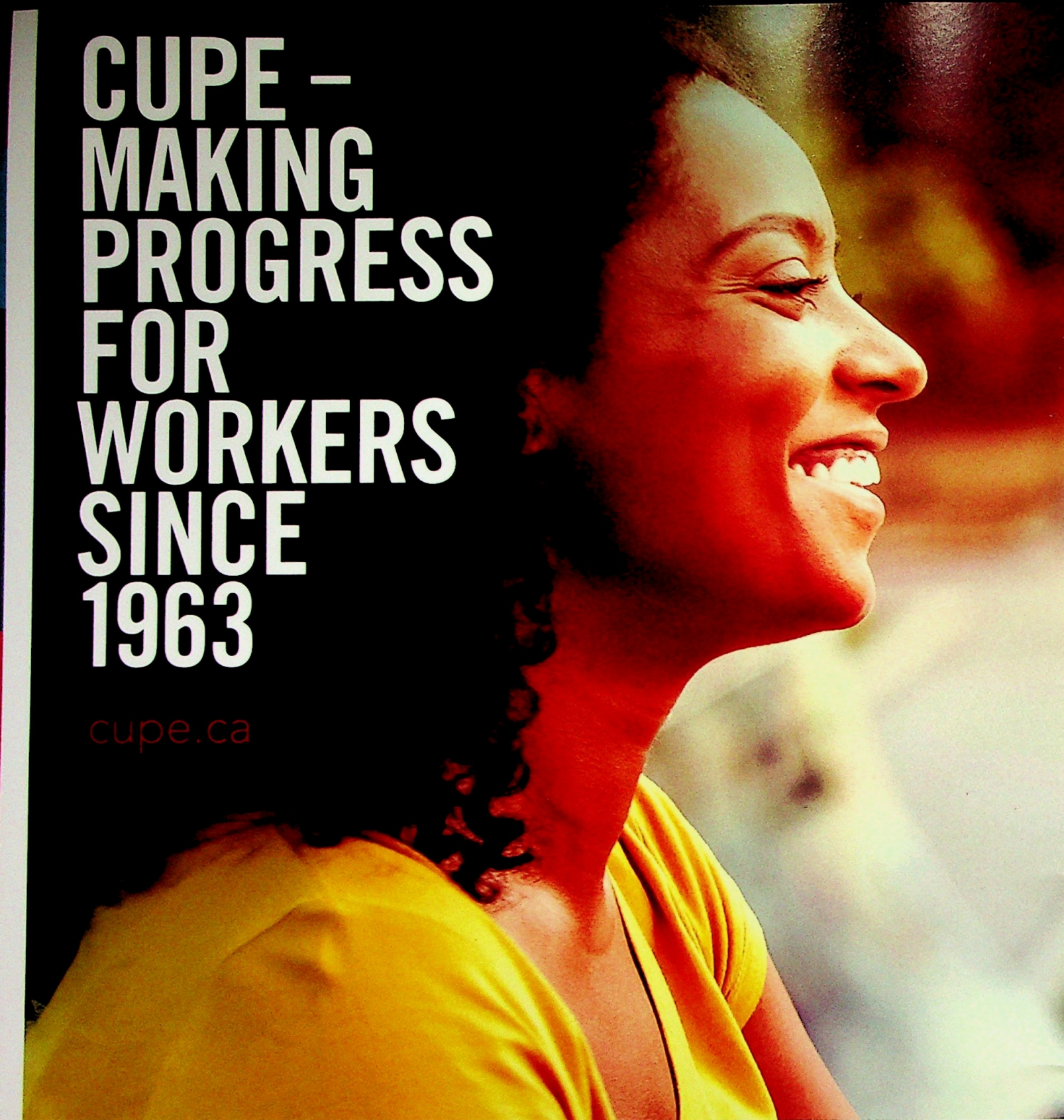


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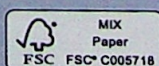
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# briarpatch

FIERCELY INDEPENDENT

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# Human rites

It seems, these days, that all major publications are writing about transitioning. *The Atlantic*, *National Geographic*, and *The Outline* have all had cover stories about transgender people in the last couple of years. But the kinds of stories they publish are telling. Most of them are about trans people vying for the approval of cis people – who usually decide that trans people are only *properly* trans when they conform to white, able-bodied, cisgender, and heteronormative standards. Most of these stories are about people who transition as children, and too many of them whip up a panic by arguing that gender-affirming health care is too readily accessible to kids.

For example, in Jesse Singal's recent cover story in *The Atlantic*, "When children say they're trans," the author repeatedly suggests that young people who are exploring trans identity might not be trans, and it's up to their parents to gatekeep access to gender-affirming care and information. These are stories not about or for trans youth, but about and for their cis parents looming in the background. But Singal is one part of a larger trend: it seems like the only transition stories that mainstream media are interested in covering are about detransition, and about deciding who is *really* trans, and how cis people can tell.

It's for this reason that I will only ever publish and pay for stories about trans people's experiences written by trans people. I was excited to choose Alex Verman's article, "Taking your transition into your own hands," as the winner of the 2018 Andrea Walker Memorial Prize for writing on women's and trans people's health. In it, she writes about all the ways that doctors deny trans people's sovereignty over their own bodies – and how trans people weave through and around a transphobic medical system to access care and medications on their own terms. She also writes about a reality that's relatively new to mainstream media discussion: that of non-binary transitions. "I'm not trying to transition all the way," a non-binary person named Kat tells Verman. "I just want to feel more like myself."

I was excited to work with two emerging trans artists of colour who made the art that accompanies Verman and Eve Parker Finley's pieces: B Hayward (our cover artist) and Lee Lai, respectively.

While mainstream media is obsessed with figuring out who is *really* trans – and so forcing trans folks to prove their validity to cis people through endless thinkpieces – it saps energy from trans issues that demand radical solidarity and action: homelessness, over-incarceration, sexual assault, and access to health care. So in publishing writing on trans issues, the work

of a publication like *Briarpatch* is to remind our readers of the ways that poverty and neoliberalism are trans issues – and how we must refocus our energies to put trans folks at the front of our struggles against them.

For example, after the provincial government slashed the Saskatchewan Transportation Company in their vicious austerity budget in 2017, banking that the private sector would fill in the gap, Greyhound announced in last month that it was also ending its Western Canada bus routes. This all means that it will be immeasurably more difficult for trans people living in rural areas of Saskatchewan – where, as trans activist Cat Haines estimates in Verman's piece, there are only three or

four doctors who can provide good transition-related care – to safely access hormones or surgery. In our fight against austerity and privatization, we have to make sure that the solutions we propose are ones that meet the needs of those who are most vulnerable.

As trans people are increasingly folded into neoliberal human rights discourse, we see that human rights protections are being extended to

cover gender identity. In many ways, this is an important win to be celebrated. But in her piece about organizing to make the YMCAs of Quebec more inclusive of gender-diverse people, Finley notes that "such a top-down system of recourse for gender-based discrimination" means that these protections are still mediated by the state and are hard to access for trans folks who are low-income, or who are at risk of deportation. I'm reminded of Arundhati Roy's fear, in *Things That Can And Cannot Be Said*, that we've traded in our true goal of justice for all for the consolation prize of human rights for those the state deems human. ★

SAIMA DESAI, EDITOR  
saima@briarpatchmagazine.com

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### Dismantle the AFN – before it causes any more damage to Indigenous sovereignty

BY COURTNEY ARLT ON JULY 25, 2018

No matter who's elected national chief, the AFN is fundamentally flawed, and beyond being saved by reforms

### Will Sask NDP support oil industry or Indigenous land rights?

BY NICKITA LONGMAN AND ANDREW LOEWEN ON JULY 12, 2018

Indigenous peoples and activists are expected to "wait and see" after Meili hires longtime oil industry manager as Chief of Staff

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# FREE LEONARD PELTIER!

BY  
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HILL

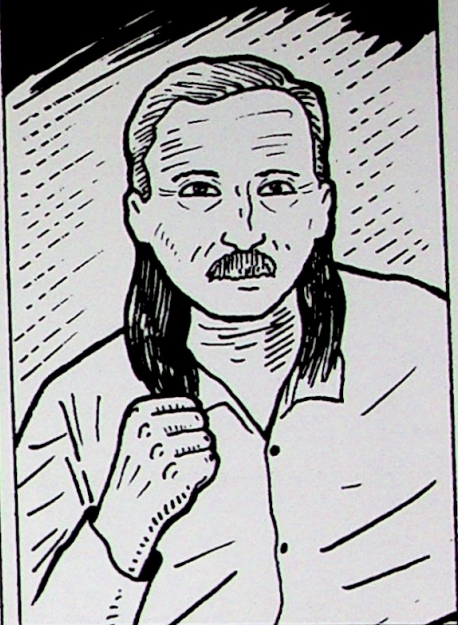
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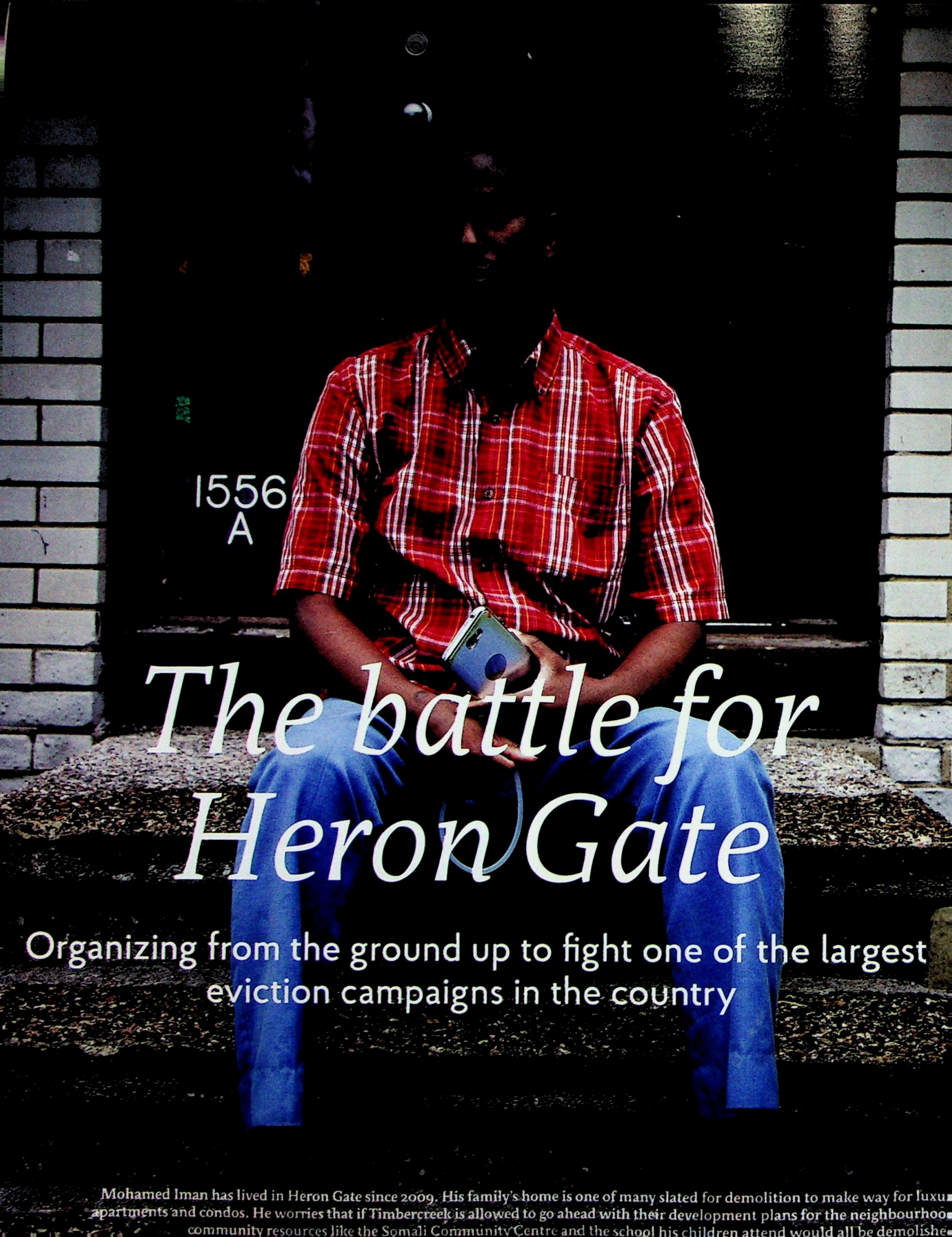
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- ☒ Celebrate labour's accomplishments like
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- ☒ Keep up the fight for equality!

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# *The battle for Heron Gate*

Organizing from the ground up to fight one of the largest  
eviction campaigns in the country

Mohamed Iman has lived in Heron Gate since 2009. His family's home is one of many slated for demolition to make way for luxury  
apartments and condos. He worries that if Timbercreek is allowed to go ahead with their development plans for the neighbourhood  
community resources like the Somali Community Centre and the school his children attend would all be demolished.



BY THE HERON GATE  
TENANT COALITION  
PHOTOS BY NEAL ROCKWELL

Fatima was quick to find another townhouse for her family when her landlord – the multinational, multi-billion-dollar, Toronto-based Timbercreek Asset Management – issued eviction notices to dozens of families in the south-east Ottawa neighbourhood of Heron Gate in September 2015. Fatima (which isn't her real name) was living in one of the 83 townhouses that sat on a parcel of land that developers, speculators, city councillors, and urban planners were salivating over as the prime location for a new "resort-style apartment" complex. She and her neighbours were told they had until February 29, 2016, to leave. Aside from the trauma of displacement, the dead of winter is not the greatest time to be moving in Ottawa.

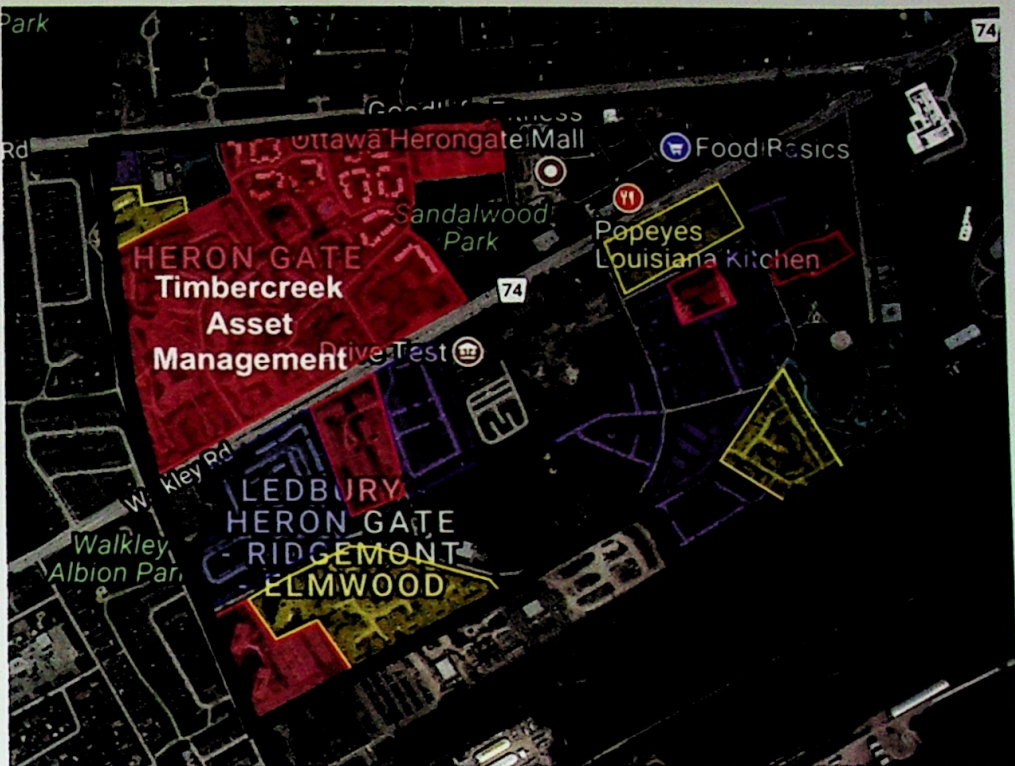
City parcel by city parcel, Timbercreek is evicting us and our neighbours, and demolishing family houses. Over 400 residents were served eviction notices this spring. In an interview with *Muslim Link*, Fatima, a member of the Heron Gate Tenant Coalition, described the pain of coming to realize Timbercreek's ultimate goal of erasing Heron Gate.

"Losing my house was less important

*"Losing my house was less important than my fear of losing my community."*

than my fear of losing my community," she says. "Timbercreek thinks because we are a majority immigrant community, they can take advantage of us, and because we are mainly low-income families that we do not know our rights – but they are wrong."

Living with Fatima was her husband, their six children, and their granddaughter – nine people in a four-bedroom home. At the end of 2015, when she found another townhouse across the street in another parcel of the Timbercreek-owned property, she was denied the \$1,500



*Mapping the residential property owners in Heron Gate: red is corporate landlord, yellow is municipal social housing (Ottawa Community Housing), purple is private condos, and blue is private non-profit (housing co-ops and supportive housing).*

promised to evicted tenants. Timbercreek told her she was disqualified because she found a place on her own, rather than through the proper "relocation process." She fought back, but Timbercreek refused to give her the money.

Now, two and a half years later, Fatima and her family are being told for the second time they are being evicted, as Timbercreek now wants to demolish the houses on the parcel of land she moved to. They are being offered three months' rent, as per Ontario's Residential Tenancies Act, and \$2,000 – though this time the money is being called a "moving incentive."

But this round of evictions is different – tenants are organized across Heron Gate and we are ready to fight to save the neighbourhood. Fatima is standing alongside her neighbours to say, "WE ARE NOT MOVING."

## MAPPING HERON GATE

Timbercreek controls the housing of around 4,000 people in Heron Gate – one of the largest clusters of residential rentals owned

by one landlord in Canada. The neighbourhood is split right down the middle into two wards, making collective organizing very difficult. The north side of Heron Gate – almost entirely owned by Timbercreek – has the highest level of core housing need in Ottawa. It is the neighbourhood with the most Brown and Black residents by far, and is one of the poorest. Structural inequality and racism are alive and well in Canada's capital – and we are its prey.

Timbercreek's Heron Gate is large enough to be its own census tract, so specific data is available on poverty, housing, and immigration through the 2016 Statistics Canada Census. One of the most significant tasks we undertook was a highly localized census of the 105 townhouses currently facing eviction. It turns out 44 per cent of the residents are of Somali descent, while 89 per cent of all residents are people of colour. There are five and a half people per home, accounting for hundreds of children, and many of the households are led by single mothers.

These are working class families, and many of them are already struggling financially. But they have their community.





Jasmine and Vanessa play on a tire swing in Sandalwood Park. They both live in Heron Gate. Jasmine's mother, Shauria Pilon, said that Timbercreek has been very slow on maintenance, and that her apartment has a serious cockroach infestation. "There's mad roaches. When you turn the lights on they go everywhere, Jasmine screams."



Heron Gate is a phenomenally tight-knit neighbourhood, where doors are always open, where many members of racialized communities don't feel like the "Other" and don't have to live always braced for being told to "go back to your country." The demolition of such a racialized community sends a larger implicit message: we don't want you here.

Property record searches at the Ontario Land Registry office in Ottawa offered a lot more insight into the insidious ownership schemes behind this massive piece of real estate.

The properties in Heron Gate began to decline into squalor in 2007 when TransGlobe, one of the worst corporate slumlords in Canada, bought the properties from Minto, which began developing the land in the 1960s. TransGlobe was owned by Daniel Drimmer, who oversaw the financialization and commodification of housing by pooling capital from large investors and forming real estate investment trusts (REITs); TransGlobe has since morphed into Starlight, Northview Apartment REIT, and a number of other monster landlords. There are YouTube videos from tenants and news articles dating from 2006 showing the neglect wrought almost overnight by TransGlobe on properties across Canada – roaches, mice, mould, leaks, foundation problems, broken and missing doors and windows, and more. Heron Gate appears to be part of a larger national campaign to slumify people's homes, with the long-term goal of redeveloping neighbourhoods,

has become synonymous with squalor. And they've been programmed to misunderstand the decay of homes in Heron Gate as the fault of the poor and Black and Brown residents – it's chalked up to "laziness" or "cultural differences." In reality, the neglect is the direct result of the racist, capitalist, and neocolonial structures of real estate and city planning that implicitly subject the poor to subhuman conditions while seeking high returns above all else. All our lives, we have seen the onus wrongfully placed on the families of Heron Gate – our families.

The responsibility to maintain livable conditions has always been and remains the landlord's responsibility, set out in the provincial Residential Tenancies Act. However, through all the legal loopholes, the reciprocal back-scratching (Ottawa's mayor and the local councillor received campaign donations from Timbercreek in 2014, while the previous councillor is in business with a former vice-president of Minto), and the bureaucratic languor, this purposeful neglect is now the very thing being weaponized to displace over 400 people.

### **EVICTION AFTER EVICTION, PARCEL BY PARCEL**

Many tenants who are now organizing to save Heron Gate have known each other for years. Others only came on board in the past few months. But we all share a common struggle as we come from low-income families. We also know our neighbourhood inside out, so we're miles ahead of any upper-crust Ottawa developers, let alone executives from Toronto.

The Heron Gate Tenant Coalition formed a few days after the current phase of evictions was announced on May 7, 2018. But preparations started months

before, in fall 2017. Community dinners, public meetings, and walking tours were organized to start discussing housing affordability, displacement, and the power of the community to shape our

*Heron Gate was merely part of a larger national campaign to slumify people's homes, with the long-term goal of pushing working-class folk out.*

neighbourhood. What emerged from this initial groundwork is the jaw-dropping insight that one company – Timbercreek – is monopolizing half our neighbourhood.

There are no tenant associations in Heron Gate. No social service provider was challenging these evictions in any capacity – we haven't had any help from our community legal clinic or our community health centre. With the first wave of evictions in September 2015, tenants were left scrambling on their own. Many moved away, but some stayed in Heron Gate – which is why so many families are now facing a second eviction. There was no precedent to follow in organizing to stop the evictions, so most of the tenants moved without a fight.

Many community support services have claimed "neutrality," at best, in this fight, suggesting that tenants immediately look for homes and abandon their community. Tenants have the choice to stay and challenge the evictions or leave voluntarily. It has often felt as though the institutions entrusted with being an aid to the community have actually worked in service of the very people hurting the community. In comparison, the Parkdale Neighbourhood Legal Clinic actively helped tenants in Toronto fight above-guideline rent increases in 2017.

Unbeknownst to most people, Timbercreek has had a redevelopment plan for the area in place for years, which makes the continual shuffling of tenants from property to property that much more sinister. On May 7, 2018, tenants – many

*People have been programmed to misunderstand the decay of homes in Heron Gate as the fault of the poor and Black and Brown residents.*

turning housing into investment funds, and pushing working-class folk out.

Timbercreek has deliberately neglected Heron Gate homes for so long that, in the minds of most Ottawans, the neighbourhood



of whom have lived in the neighbourhood for decades, and others who are just finding their footing in the country as newcomers – were called to a meeting with Timbercreek and councillor Jean Cloutier. They were handed a cumbersome package, containing a plethora of documents explaining what was happening, and told they only had four months to leave their homes.

Imagine being a single mother of three or four kids, and having to figure out where to go in a city where the lack of affordable and suitable housing has been deemed a crisis. Imagine owning a private business, like a daycare, where all of your clientele is from the neighbourhood, and having to move, which would put you out of a job. Now factor in being the sole provider for your home.

The fight to stay in our neighbourhood has been a multi-generational effort. The elders have the social capital to reassure the younger, more timid, and vulnerable tenants that they *do* have the right to adequate housing. Tenants say that Timbercreek

has tried to push them out by telling them that their locks will be changed and their belongings thrown out on the street if they do not voluntarily move by September 30. In turn, the youth in the community have done more of the physical work of canvassing, providing the community with daily updates, filling out work orders, and mobilizing on social media.

Social media has allowed us to connect with organizers and supporters from around the world. However, absolutely nothing can replace face-to-face interactions, tenant meetings, and personal connections with allies. Our most heartfelt work is in building relationships and opening space for sincere discussion on home turf – which gives us a leg up over developers, who use “community visioning” sessions as an opportunity to co-opt our desires and as a convenient public relations prelude to evictions.

After putting a call out through our artist networks, Montreal-based photojournalist Neal Rockwell came on board to help us create our own videos and audio interviews, so

we could control the message and encourage tenants to open up without the pressure of speaking to what is often (though not always) an insensitive, uninformed, and preoccupied mainstream media.

There is no one “best practice” in collective organizing – which is why making connections across cities and movements is so important, to learn as many skills and tactics as possible. From the Parkdale Organize! rent strike last summer and the East Hamilton rent strike this summer, to the 1970s battle for Milton-Parc, working-class people have come together to fight and win against plans by massive landlords and governments to raze our neighbourhoods. Drawing inspiration and strength from these struggles, we, too, are certain we will win. ★

THE HERON GATE TENANT COALITION was formed by the working-class people of the Heron Gate neighbourhood of south Ottawa, to build power, strength, and solidarity among residents. Visit [www.herongatetenants.ca](http://www.herongatetenants.ca).



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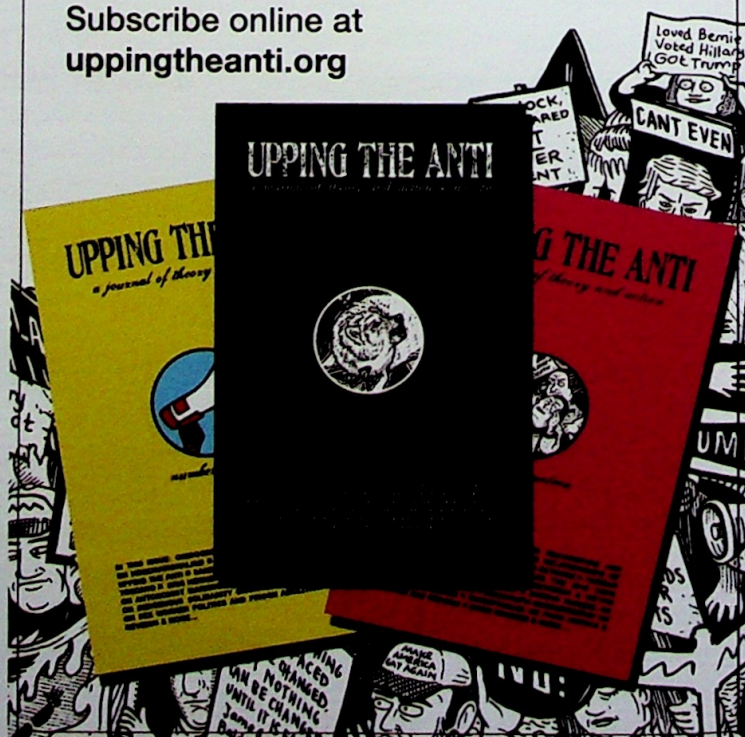
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## QUOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND



"Utopia lies at the horizon. When I draw nearer by two steps, it retreats two steps. If I proceed ten steps forward, it swiftly slips ten steps ahead. No matter how far I go, I can never reach it. What, then, is the purpose of utopia? It is to cause us to walk."

—EDUARDO GALEANO,  
*LAS PALABRAS ANDANTES*

"Anybody who thinks that they can understand how terrible the terror has been, without understanding how beautiful the beauty has been against the grain of the terror, is wrong."

—FRED MOTEN

"I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away."

I saw in theory then a location for healing."

—BELL HOOKS,  
*THEORY AS LIBERATORY PRACTICE*

"While sensible people, garden-party appalled, wondered aloud if important men should really lose their careers in the small of some woman's back, we sat at home knowing that getting fired was mercy, not vengeance."

—ANDREA LONG CHU,  
*"BAD TV," N+1 MAG*

"What if we discover that our present way of life is irreconcilable with our vocation to become fully human?"

—PAULO FREIRE

"The purpose of a writer is to make revolution irresistible."

—TONI CADE BAMBARA





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*Trans activists in Montreal have been organizing to make the YMCAs of Québec more inclusive of gender-diverse people*

# Ts just wanna have fun

BY EVE PARKER FINLEY

ILLUSTRATION BY LEE LAI

“kay, let's do something about it.”

I cherish moments like this: two trans friends talking about changing the world. “When I realized you were just as pissed as I was, I knew this was a big issue we needed to address,” explains my friend Rene. We’re sitting in Parc Outremont reflecting on how, in a few short weeks, we went from being isolated individuals experiencing transphobia at our local YMCA to galvanizing community support, creating spaces for solidarity, presenting our concerns to the YMCAs of Québec’s higher administration, and having them respond with a draft plan for building a more trans-inclusive YMCA.

It’s an amazingly powerful experience to challenge exclusion, and to realize the strength of your community of trans friends – new and old – and cis allies. It can also be some of the most emotionally exhausting work. During these weeks, I cried, burnt myself out, and at times doubted the effectiveness of everything we had done and were doing.

After I posted on Facebook in April about an experience of transphobia at my local YMCA, I was swept away by the outpouring of support and stories from trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming friends about similar and much

more extreme experiences of transphobia. People told me about being kicked out of change rooms, being forbidden from having their names or genders recognized, being denied access to women-only spaces, being misgendered, experiencing physical violence and verbal harassment from other gym-goers and staff, and being asked invasive questions about their bodies and surgical history.

In every arena of the world, trans people have to navigate systems that were

PEOPLE TOLD ME ABOUT  
BEING KICKED OUT  
OF CHANGE ROOMS,  
BEING MISGENDERED,  
AND EXPERIENCING  
PHYSICAL VIOLENCE  
AND VERBAL  
HARASSMENT.

never designed with us in mind – or were designed specifically to exclude us. A 2015 Trans PULSE study reported that 20 per cent of trans people in Ontario had experienced physical or sexual assault for being trans, and 34 per cent had been verbally

threatened or harassed. Approximately two-thirds had avoided public spaces for fear of being outed and experiencing harassment, and one-third of trans Ontarians reported having to move away in order to access services or escape harassment.

Statistics show that being bullied and terrorized out of access to services and safe space is a constant reality for trans people. Access to a trans-friendly gym may not be the first priority for everyone organizing around trans safety, but it’s still an important one. Everywhere you look, trans people’s health is de-prioritized – in access to mental health services, gender-affirming medications or surgery, or, yes, gyms. It often seems that only cis bodies “deserve” health. Gyms – spaces where we undress, sweat, reckon with our bodies, struggle toward fitness and longevity – are spaces of vulnerability, where the risk of assault and harassment is especially heightened for trans people.

Trans people are long overdue for a system overhaul with us in mind. Within 24 hours of my Facebook post, we had an email list of 20 trans people wanting to gather to discuss what we should do to push gyms in the city to be more trans-inclusive. A week later, six trans friends gathered around my cramped kitchen table to plot our next steps.



We quickly rallied friends and allies to email the YMCA administration, demanding they take immediate action to make the institution more inclusive of trans people. Within a few short days, the vice president of health, fitness and aquatics for YMCAs of Québec and the centre director of the YMCA du Parc (the location where I experienced the transphobia) agreed to meet with us to discuss these issues. Our group prepared a seven-page letter containing 13 demands for steps the YMCA could take to be more inclusive of trans members. They included allowing access to the family change room, training for all staff, stopping the collection of information about people's gender, hiring trans staff, and respecting members' names and pronouns.

In many ways, our meetings with the YMCA administration were a victory. For example, they clarified that there is, in fact, no rule barring members from having a name or gender different from the legal

## IT OFTEN SEEMS THAT ONLY CIS BODIES "DESERVE" HEALTH.

name on their card and in their file. On the other hand, I quickly realized how a lack of knowledge and a lot of fear prevent institutions like the YMCA from expanding access to trans people.

"I'm a little scared talking to you," one of the YMCA administrators admitted to us near the end of our second two-hour

meeting. "Why do you think she was scared of us?" I ask Rene, weeks later, at our debrief in the park. It evokes a familiar feeling of confusion and exhaustion. We wonder how an institution that prides itself on inclusivity could have neglected to consider a system-wide approach to trans inclusion for so long. Two passersby stare at us in our tight shorts and flirty summer shirts. Rene turns to me and declares, "People are used to trans people coming from this place of vulnerability – but we didn't come to them with that. We came prepared and researched. I think being trans and that empowered intimidates people."

I smile again, thinking about how lucky I am to be surrounded by so many empowered trans people.

I invite my friend Mich – one of the trans





friends I'm lucky to have in my community – out for lunch at a local Mexican snack bar. We sit on the veranda, awkwardly close to a family that's out for Sunday lunch. Mich's mesh tank top, little acid-washed jean shorts, and flowing brown hair make her stand out against the buttoned-up yuppie parents and hipster art bros.

"When I first signed up for the Y, I saw you had to select a gender and I asked if it was okay if I didn't answer, and they said no," Mich tells me. We both laugh at the familiarity of coming up against people who lack the understanding, and institutions that are devoid of the processes, to include gender-diverse people.

"When I go to the gym, I negate myself – my identity – completely for the benefit of my physical and mental well-being," Mich laments. When I ask why she prefers the men's change room, Mich responds, "Because there's a steam room! I also identify as a woman and two-spirit, which means existing and identifying within supposedly opposing sides of the spectrum. So I do feel elements of comfort

[being in a men's space], but it's a tricky thing." We giggle and reminisce about the time we ran into each other in the men's steam room: two strong trans women gossiping and occupying space.

## WHY ARE WE GROUPED UNDER THE VAGUE CATEGORY OF "ALL," WHEN THE VIOLENCE WE FACE AND THE PROTECTIONS WE SEEK ARE PARTICULAR?

In a more sombre moment, Mich admits, "If I were to use the women's change room I can imagine the onslaught of rich white women being so offended – and that being the most uncomfortable experience ever. I don't know ... I'm sad it's the way it is. It shouldn't be that way, not now."

She's right – it shouldn't be this way,

not now. With the passage of Bill C-16 in October 2016, gender identity and presentation were affirmed as protected classes in the Canadian Human Rights Act and Criminal Code. In Quebec, the Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms additionally forbids harassment and discrimination based on gender identity and expression in the province. Of course, as most marginalized communities know, legal protections don't necessarily translate into more inclusive and empowering systems, interactions with individuals, or cultural norms. Additionally, living with such a top-down system of recourse for gender-based discrimination, it often takes an individual or group with the social, cultural, and financial resources necessary to take advantage of these new protections via a legal claim.

My own experience of signing up with the YMCA is one example. While renewing my then-expired membership, I was surprised to read in the contract that the family change room, the sole gender-neutral facility in the building, was only for adults



Registered nurses are the  
**frontline**  
 of safe patient care. ” —Dr. Anish Mody

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who were accompanied by children under the age of 12. When I questioned the policy, the front desk staffer assured me that yes, in fact, that was "the rule." Pushing aside the awkwardness and anxiety that comes with outing oneself to a complete stranger in order to access a service, I told her I was transitioning and would prefer to use a gender-neutral facility as my body changed. While she was sympathetic, she told me that would not be permitted.

A few weeks later, after our first successful meeting, in which the YMCA administration cleared up the rules around names on membership cards, I walked confidently up to the front desk and asked that my card be changed to reflect my real name. The staffer looked at me inquisitively and asked if I was "lying" when I told her the director of the centre had assured me this was allowed. I was not lying – in what world would I lie to deliberately experience the awkwardness, anxiety, and risk of violence inherent in so assuredly presenting myself as a trans woman? Luckily, I walked out of the YMCA with an ID – my first ID – that

uses my real name. It was a hard-fought moment of joy.

Being trans is tough and it's beautiful. We live in a highly gender-regulated world, where stereotypes, falsehoods, and misplaced concerns for the safety of cis-gender women – as opposed to all women – continue to dictate the policies of institu-

## LUCKILY, I WALKED OUT OF THE YMCA WITH AN ID – MY FIRST ID – THAT USES MY REAL NAME.

tions like the YMCA. When contacted for a quote for this article, the administration's response affirmed that, "we are committed to providing an inclusive environment to all. The work, actions, consultations and research necessary to develop a coherent plan are presently in the works."

While the statement sounds promising, the absence of a single mention of the trans community is telling. Why are institutions

so afraid of explicitly and unequivocally welcoming trans people specifically? Why are we grouped under the vague category of "all," when the violence we face and the protections we seek are particular? When will the trans community be given more than platitudes and vague promises?

While we wait for the YMCA administration to release to the public their approved plan for institutional change, trans people in Quebec and beyond will continue to find ways to exist in a world structured around our exclusion – whether that means hiding ourselves, cladding ourselves in armour, fearlessly demanding access to spaces we have every right to occupy, finding comfort and power in community, or leveraging human rights protections and the media. Make space for us or we will make it for ourselves. ★



**EVE PARKER FINLEY** is a 24-year-old equity educator, musician, and activist trans woman living in Montreal.

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BY ALEX VERMAN  
ILLUSTRATION BY B HAYWARD

# TAKING YOUR TRANSITION INTO YOUR OWN HANDS

When doctors deny trans people the right hormones or surgery, trans people will find creative ways to transition on their own terms

“I was one of those people who fell through the cracks,” J.D. tells me.

J.D. grew up in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. He came out as a trans man in his early 20s. At the time, there was only one endocrinologist – a doctor specializing in hormones – in the province who worked with trans patients. She worked part-time, and the waiting list to see her was between 18 and 24 months.

After he finally got the referral, J.D. spent several months being bounced from doctor to doctor. His files were lost, his appointments weren’t booked. These are the kind of clerical errors that seem to happen an awful lot to trans people, because endless referrals mean endless opportunities for human error and casual transphobia to collide.

In the meantime, J.D. tried everything he could to fill in the gaps. He researched testosterone-rich foods and changed his diet. He started exercising to redistribute his body mass into a more recognizably

“masculine” shape. In 2012, a year after he got his referral, J.D. finally had a prescription for testosterone.

J.D.’s initial testosterone prescription was an unreasonably low dosage of 0.25 mg administered every week and a half. But increasing it involved another round of blood tests, and because his doctor didn’t set the customary checkup appointment, the endocrinologist’s office considered J.D. out of their system. Neither he nor his pharmacists nor his family doctors could seem to get anyone at the office on the phone. If he wanted to get proper gender-affirming medication, he would have to restart the entire process all over again.

“I got tired of the waiting. I got tired of not receiving care that was either culturally competent or medically adequate,” says J.D. “So I took matters into my own hands. I started self-medicating.”

Using this first prescription to gain access to testosterone, J.D. began gradually upping his intake. He’s been







self-medicating with testosterone ever since.

On paper, Nova Scotia uses a model of informed consent, where family doctors are able to prescribe hormones or other gender-affirming medications to transgender patients, provided that patients have realistic expectations around results and risks. This is similar to the practice in Ontario and other provinces – in theory, it allows trans patients to open up to their doctors, access information, follow up with blood tests, and start a program of hormone therapy.

Yet in trying to access transition-related care, trans people regularly encounter unsustainably long waiting lists for trips to far-flung offices. Whether or not you're able to access hormones is often up to the discretion of individual practitioners, who can simply decide they're

not comfortable writing a prescription. Beyond that, many jurisdictions don't offer health coverage for transition-related care, and costs can be prohibitive.

According to a study by the Trans PULSE Project that focused on transgender health care in Ontario, self-medication with hormones is surprisingly common. Though their sample size is small, the results are still illuminating: of the 433 study participants, one-tenth reported using hormones they'd gotten from friends or from the Internet; 14 reported currently taking non-prescribed hormones; five participants had even attempted or performed surgical procedures on themselves, such as a DIY orchiectomy (removing the testicles) or mastectomy (removing breasts). Many participants cited a lack of money and past negative experiences with providers as causes for taking their transitions into their own hands.

## WHERE WE COME FROM

Medical professionals tend to view being trans as a mental health issue. This was the logic underpinning the first gender identity clinics (GICs) in the 1960s – medical centres where

sexologists and psychiatrists would study and assess incoming transgender patients. There, patients would receive counselling and/or a referral to an endocrinologist, provided they fit the diagnosis of something called gender identity disorder – which effectively classified being transgender as a medical condition. The label has since been scrapped, replaced with an expanded entry for "dysphoria" in the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* in 2013.

Since the 1990s, GICs have fallen by the wayside – where many people believe they belong. Though they've now been largely superseded by an approach based on informed consent, GICs once opened important doors for people to medically transition safely. They also, predictably, became sites where narratives about *who* and *what* a trans person could be were solidified.

Because of the diagnostic model GICs rested upon, and the costs associated with transition-related health care, they tended to reproduce a very specific image of what a transgender patient could and should look like: white, heterosexual, binary, and able-bodied. Often, people were turned away if they couldn't fit the narrow criteria of these clinics. Two and a half years after the

first gender-affirming surgery clinic in the U.S. was opened at the Johns Hopkins Hospital in 1966, it had performed gender-affirming surgeries on only 24 of 2,000 applicants.

That image has persisted, and shaped the common understanding of transitioning as a passage between two poles. Deviation from that script could mean the end of your journey. For example,

patients had to prove that they were fully presenting as their gender in their social lives, including proving that they were employed as their gender; if you were masc (transmasculine), you had to be masc at all times, and be dating heterosexual women, or else you'd be dismissed as a confused lesbian.

The idea of being a gay trans person was almost unheard of. GICs had a strict policy forbidding treatment of queer trans people, with gatekeepers insisting that the two worlds should not collide. Lou Sullivan, a gay trans man based in San Francisco, had to fight with GICs across the U.S. for years before he found someone willing to prescribe him testosterone in 1979. Even then, it was considered scandalous within the medical community.

Sullivan was diagnosed as HIV-positive in 1986. Before dying in 1990, he wrote: "I took a certain pleasure in informing the gender clinic that even though their program told me I could not live as a Gay man, it looks like I'm going to die like one."

## NAVIGATING GATEKEEPERS

My friend Faith is a Black trans lesbian living in Toronto. She told me about her experience at CAMH, the Centre for

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Addiction and Mental Health, which houses Ontario's only GIC. There, she met with Kenneth Zucker – the doctor who helped create the definition of “dysphoria” for the *DSM-5*.

“After I explained to the doctor that I identified as a lesbian and played with feminine toys as a child, despite me repeatedly telling him about my dysphoria that’s spanned my entire life and [my] lack of attraction to men, he then proceeded to claim that I was most likely a ‘gay male in denial about his sexuality,’ and told me that he didn’t feel comfortable referring me to an endocrinologist,” Faith recalls. “I ended up breaking down in front of him and literally having to beg him to still refer me to an endocrinologist, which he eventually gave in to.”

The endocrinologist that Dr. Zucker sent her to suggested she start on a regimen of 100 mg of a drug called spironolactone. After three months on spiro, Faith would start her estrogen.

Spironolactone is an anti-androgen that reduces testosterone so that the body is more receptive to estrogen. But Faith’s blood work suggested that her baseline levels of both testosterone and estrogen were already quite low. Anti-androgens can cause side effects ranging from liver damage to weakness to mood swings – taking them without any other primary sex hormone in one’s system, some trans folks say, exacerbates these symptoms.

None of this information was shared with Faith, however. And even after increasingly higher doses of spiro, multiple blood tests showed that her estrogen levels continued to be low. “When I saw him three months later at the next appointment, he prescribed me 2 mg of estrogen,” she says. “Then I did some blood work, and my estrogen levels were low, so he decided to bump up only the spironolactone to 200 mg, then later up to 300 mg.”

Faith says she started feeling very weak and fatigued. She didn’t understand why her doctor had her on this dosage, and he didn’t explain it to her. The only forthcoming source of information was from other trans people. “I talked to my transfeminine friends on HRT [hormone replacement therapy], and they told me about and sent me research that showed that this was a dangerous decision by my doctor,” says Faith.

“At this point, I decided to take matters into my own hands and bump my estrogen dosage up to 4 mg and my spiro down to 100 mg without consulting the endocrinologist until our next appointment together,” Faith says.

This would not be the only time that Faith’s endocrinologist fought her, instead of listening to what she was telling him about her body and her needs. The second time concerned a request for progesterone, which many transfeminine people insist helps to increase breast growth and improve their sex drives. To a doctor, these things sound more like “wants” than “needs” and aren’t

considered important. And because the research on HRT overwhelmingly deals with menopausal women, many doctors doubt the validity of giving progesterone to transfeminine people. Faith’s endocrinologist dismissed claims about its effectiveness as “solely anecdotal.”

“It was becoming increasingly obvious that I knew more about my body and that I’d done much more research on HRT than my doctor,” says Faith.

The unfortunate fact is that many doctors are deeply under-educated on trans health care. That puts the onus on trans patients to keep a close eye on their own health and mitigate any potential risks. As a result, many trans patients have done more research about trans health care than their doctors have, developing networks of shared information about hormones and specialists.

“Doctors don’t know anything about hormone shots,” says my friend P.J., a non-binary person living in Toronto. I was sitting at his kitchen table with him and my friend Nasash, a trans woman, eating strawberries. “They’ll tell you to inject in the hip, or the thigh, or the belly, and they don’t tell you how to stop leakage,” he says. “So for a lot of people, the shots are just not as effective.”

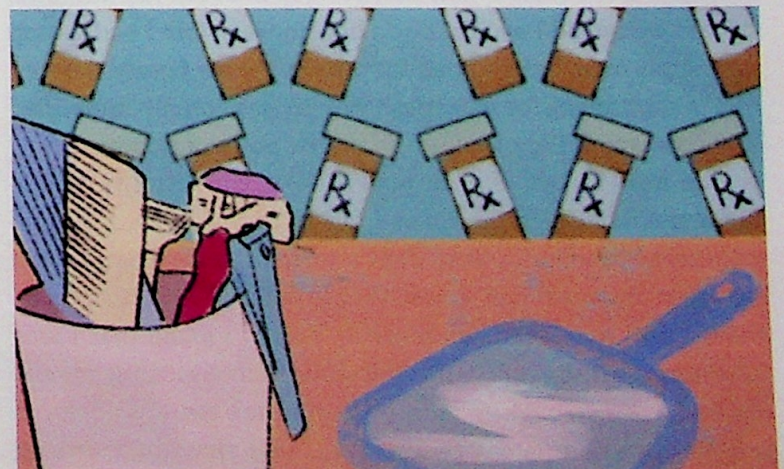
He tells me that he found out the best protocol by doing his own online research: shots should ideally be administered to the hip muscle, with the skin pushed together in one direction to prevent leakage.

“My current issue is that I don’t have a doctor and haven’t been able to get one for a year,” says Nasash, who lost health

coverage after graduating from university last year. “I want to do investigations into my cortisol levels, to see if my organs are getting jumbled around by fat deposits that shouldn’t exist, which is a possible complication of spironolactone.”

Nasash has an almost encyclopedic knowledge of hormones, and she knows exactly what she wants. But at this point, she’s less concerned with being restricted by her doctors, and more worried

## THAT IMAGE HAS PERSISTED, AND SHAPED THE COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF TRANSITIONING AS A PASSAGE BETWEEN TWO POLES. DEVIATION FROM THAT SCRIPT COULD MEAN THE END OF YOUR JOURNEY.







about her ability to even access the medical system in order to transition safely. "I've gone on and off these things unmonitored, but now I'm in a position where I need more medicine to do all the things I want, but I can't really get any of it because I still need a family doctor and I can't seem to get one," she says.

Faith is in a similar boat. Due to scheduling conflicts, busy workdays, and financial obstacles, Faith missed her next appointment, and thus, her next prescription. Faith then turned to her community, borrowing hormones from friends and adjusting dosages as needed to help her achieve her personal transition goals.

### CLINICAL COURAGE

About two months into HRT, I began to lactate.

Nasash told me it could be a symptom of some larger chemical imbalance, and to keep an eye on it. My doctor said I shouldn't worry. It went away the next day, but the damage had been done. I felt like a freak. A couple weeks after the lactation incident, I gave my hormones to my weed dealer — she loved them.

I stopped taking hormones because changes were coming too quickly, and I was scared for the future. I was cute as a boy, so was I really ready to become an ugly girl? When did I need to buy new clothes, and when would I find time to improve my makeup? Did I need a new name? When would my tits come in? How long did I need to be on hormones before I had to stop dating gay men, before I had to come out to my family, before I had to start saving for surgeries? Where was I on my "timeline," and how would I know when I'd hit the point of no return?

I'm non-binary, but on paper, I was transitioning male to female. However, the times I felt most feminine, my most intuitively, inherently, absolutely a woman, were when I wore sweaters and caps, pressing flat what little chest I had, clean-shaven and barefaced, undeniably butch. I joked that I was transitioning into a trans man, but while transmasculine friends of mine were struggling with testosterone's twin children of jawline acne and patchy peach fuzz, I was glowing. Estrogen

does wonders for your skin.

One of the funny things about transitioning is that every doctor has a different opinion and is utterly confused by this when you bring it up. We're in the age of the transsexual science experiment, as much a modern marvel of medicine as an act against god or a circus freak show. For a long time, what little scholarly information was available in the area of trans health care was limited to discussions of white subjects by white authors, which spawned a flurry of theorizing by social workers, psychologists, sexologists, and any other kind of cisgender thinker over what gender *really* meant, and what transition *really* entailed — a discourse that lives on and infects all forms of transgender health care, from psychotherapy to phalloplasty.

I talked about this with Cat Haines, a genderqueer trans woman based in Regina, whose activism focuses on harm reduction during transition. Speaking over the phone, Haines described doctors' lack of "clinical courage" — the willingness to provide treatment even when it might be uncomfortable to do so. For cisgender practitioners, providing transition-related care — especially to someone who appears young or mentally ill — can feel like a huge transgression.

Depending on the context, doctors are balancing everything from their personal hang-ups and transphobic biases to a general lack of education on trans health care. There's also the recent pearl-clutching in the media around de-transitioning, where one-off misrepresenta-

tions of trans people who regretted or reversed some aspect of their transition are used to imply that trans identities are flimsy and risky. As a result, doctors may worry about lawsuits or defamation. In short, clinical courage is hard to come by.

"Not treating a patient can cause more harm than treating a patient when you feel uncomfortable," says Haines. "There are going to be times when you will be uncomfortable. You're going to have to work through that discomfort in order to ensure that you're providing care, because you're the only doctor around."

Haines tells me that in places like Saskatchewan, clinical courage is especially necessary because access to care is so sparse. "There are very few general practitioners who are prescribing hormones, and very few who are culturally competent — I can think of maybe three or four throughout the province," says Haines.

### BEYOND A BINARY

Everyone that I talked to for this article considers themselves to be non-binary or genderqueer in some way — either as a label on its own, or as a description of their relationship to trans-masculinity or -femininity more broadly. Which is interesting, because the idea of a non-binary transition is somewhat new to mainstream discussion, though people have been expressing

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genders in complicated ways for millennia.

There's this idea that non-binary people don't transition, or that being non-binary is a phase on our way to "man" or "woman." It's obviously untrue. But all the same, I've been having trouble thinking about what transitioning might look like for me as a non-binary person – figuring that out is part of what brought me to write this article.

At the time of writing, I've been back on estrogen for about three weeks. My doctor is working with me, according to goals we discussed together. This way, I can go slowly, and gradually make changes as I feel I need to.

I spoke on the phone to a non-binary person in Toronto named Kat – their relationship with testosterone is similar to my relationship with estrogen. "I'm not trying to transition all the way," they say, "I just want to feel more like myself."

Kat got their testosterone prescription as treatment for low sex drive – or at least, that's what they told their doctor. Kat told me that they found they needed to lie because their doctor was unwilling to consider administering testosterone to someone he perceived to be doing perfectly fine living as their assigned gender. "I look like an attractive woman, and people say to me, 'why would you want to give that up?'" says Kat. "I've gotten it so many times, including from a doctor once. He said, 'why would you want to change anything? You look very good.' The doctor basically implied that I was 'performing' well as a female."

Kat's experience is not unique. In fact, many people told me about incidents of lying to doctors in order to get treatment for a fictional "need" when they were denied treatment for their actual "want."

Winnie Wang also identifies as non-binary, and menstruation makes them dysphoric, so they use birth control to suppress their periods. Birth control is hormone-based, and relies on a cycle of hormones and placebos. If you only take the hormones and not the placebos, you can effectively skip your period. Wang got birth control through their doctor, but said they needed it for cramps and heavy flow.

According to Wang, lying felt like the only sensible option. The clinic had given them significant cause for apprehension. "I was scared of them being judgmental, or not prescribing me the meds at all. I had an unrelated visit with another doctor at the clinic who misgendered me, and asked me if I was schizophrenic because I wanted to use they/them pronouns," says Wang. "So after that, I was definitely never going to tell the truth about why I wanted birth control."

Wang has been lying ever since, both about their need for birth control and about their dosages. "After I told one doctor

that I was using it to skip my periods, she said it was 'unsafe' and 'unnatural,' despite me not experiencing side effects," says Wang. "It felt more unnatural to me to have a period."

I brought this up with another non-binary person named Fable, a New Orleans-based mechanic who gets their hormones from the Internet. For them, self-medicating was an opportunity to connect more deeply with their body – what they wanted, how they were feeling, what worked for them, what felt right. They described a sense of groundedness and autonomy that they'd never achieved through the medical system. It was a homecoming.

There are all kinds of reasons people step away from the medical establishment. Most of them are rooted in necessity – issues of finances, discrimination, limitation, and access. We lie to our doctors because that's what they understand. People are more comfortable assessing our degree of suffering in our bodies than they are acknowledging our potential to expand beyond what we've been given: that you can want to be a woman, or want to be a man, or neither, or both – or, shockingly, that you might know what you want better than they do. That you might

not know what you want, but you're discovering. That you can be anything and anyone, and that you deserve to be able to do so safely – not because you've passed some test, but because you are alive. Because you want it. ★

*Some interviewees asked to change their names to protect*

*their privacy. J.D. used his initials, and Nasash used a pseudonym. In all other cases, the names used were the names the interviewees provided, some of which included surnames and some of which did not.*



ALEX VERMAN is a political writer and thinker whose work focuses on community, identity, and narrative. Alex lives and works in territories currently occupied by the city of Toronto.

## THE IDEA OF A NON-BINARY TRANSITION IS SOMEWHAT NEW TO MAINSTREAM DISCUSSION, THOUGH PEOPLE HAVE BEEN EXPRESSING GENDERS IN COMPLICATED WAYS FOR MILLENNIA.

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"I felt exhausted and alone. I didn't feel like my comrades had any affective relationships with me or each other. The struggle had actually become a job. We rarely wondered what everyone was going through. [...] Over time, I found no meaning or value in my activism. I felt emotionally and physically empty. I no longer wanted to move myself to go to the demos or to meetings because it exhausted me instead of leaving me energized."



# Be careful with each other

How activist groups can build trust, care, and sustainability  
in a world of capitalism and oppression

BY RUSHDIA MEHREEN AND DAVID GRAY-DONALD  
ILLUSTRATION BY NUSHA ASHJAE



This is what Laykü,\* who was an organizer with Palestinian solidarity and migrant justice groups in Montreal, told us it felt like at the beginning of their burnout.

Why are activists burning out, and what can be done to stop it? During the 2012 student movement in Quebec, Rushdia contributed to forming the group Politics & Care, a collective of activists and community organizers dedicated to addressing this question. The group's activities include holding discussion circles and facilitating workshops on integrating care into political work.

This article unpacks the most common organizing dynamics that lead to burnout, and explores ways in which collective care can be integrated into organizing politics and practices. It is directed mostly toward anti-authoritarian, non-hierarchical grassroots groups.

Collective care refers to seeing members' well-being – particularly their emotional health – as a shared responsibility of the group rather than the lone task of an individual. It means that a group commits to addressing interlocking oppressions and reasons for deteriorating well-being *within* the group while also combatting oppression in society at large. It places an emphasis on joint accountability, with the aim of collective empowerment. These ideas originate from queer and Black feminist organizing, such as the Combahee River Collective, and disability perspectives. It's encapsulated in the phrase, "Be careful with each other, so we can be dangerous together."

We build on previous discussions of problematic dynamics, and critiques of neoliberal notions of self-care – notably, an editorial from *Upping The Anti*, "Who cares?: The politics of care in radical organizing" – to further the conversation about collective-care-oriented solutions.

## 1. POWER AND CONTROL

We all know of an activist group that brands itself as "non-hierarchical" but is riddled with unspoken and insidious hierarchies.

When some activists organize without sleeping for days or can dedicate all their time to organizing, it puts pressure on other members to match their standards of productivity and output. Those who contribute at extreme levels often gain more knowledge of the group's goings-on, build more social capital, and claim more decision-making power. The invisible hierarchies that are created are hard to name and harder to dismantle.

Some form of privilege related to race, class, ability, gender, and sexuality is typically what underlies hierarchies based on involvement and decision-making power.

"Often the directly affected people, like migrants, who need to care for their families and struggle to make the ends meet, are not able to be present in every meeting," Ani,\* a migrant justice grassroots organizer, notes. As a result, those directly affected don't have much say in the group.

Organizing spaces often lack a true commitment to democratic decision-making processes. Discussion and debate are sacrificed in the face of an ever-looming sense of urgency. Dominant members make the call on most decisions and the rest of the members are left frustrated and disempowered.

Hoarding power and responsibility can turn into a vicious cycle. Those who take on too much often end up having short fuses, especially at crunch times when fatigue accumulates. They're less likely to show patience toward people learning the ropes, or show forgiveness for mistakes. This alienates newer members and leaves senior members feeling like they have no choice but to take

on *more* responsibility, and control *more* of the group's decisions. This pattern also leads to burnout, although this form of burnout stems from overwork rather than disempowerment.

Activists – especially senior ones – should reflect on how many groups they are a part of, and how much space they take up in each group. As the activist adage goes, "when you take a step back, someone else takes a step forward." At the same time, this calls for more experienced activists to focus on building institutional memory, and on integrating and retaining new members through mentorship and centring those who have been marginalized.

Above all, rehumanizing our approach by caring more consciously about people and their needs could make organizing a nurturing and sustainable experience.

## 2. RELIABILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Laykü points to dynamics that eroded not only his personal well-being but that of the collective.

For example, when a venue needs to be booked for a panel discussion, or a poster needs to be designed for a demonstration, and a group member volunteers to do it, the group has a sense of forward momentum; the organizing can continue from there.

But if the person who volunteered cannot be reached or otherwise falls off the radar, it can be disempowering for the group because such an interruption impedes their immediate plans and broader goals. Moreover, trust is broken. In this kind of situation, Laykü recalls, "if the event or action happens at all, it is only for the sake of it. There's not much success or impact in the end, nor a sense of group accomplishment." In Laykü's experience, "[afterward,] people don't want to take responsibility, and we don't



have any real spaces for collective learning from our mistakes.”

In the best-case scenario, people inform fellow organizers if they cannot do an assigned task. There are valid reasons for not completing tasks: health, family emergencies, or other priorities. Besides reliability, accountability is important. While accountability is a rich and complex term, here it means to acknowledge and take responsibility for the repercussions that one's actions may have on others in the group. “A sincere apology is often a good start,” says Laykū.

In the 2001 ChangeWork publication *White Supremacy Culture*, Kenneth Jackson Jones and Tema Okun propose coming to an agreement of how the work will be carried out before tasks begin. This can include laying out the various steps involved, setting deadlines, and articulating expectations for following up. Making a habit of debriefing after events – assessing what worked, what didn't, and how to improve – can help to avoid repeated mistakes, or at least restore some lost trust.

### 3.

#### INTERNALIZED CAPITALISM

“In a fast-paced world where political, social, and environmental crises are unrelenting, the sense of urgency is mounting,” says Pascale Brunet, a community organizer and co-initiator of Politics & Care. “Mix that with the pressures of capitalism to do more, always more productivity and efficiency. The message we get is that we're not enough.”

Laykū provides a snapshot from inside a group: “My group [had been infiltrated more] by the values and practices of the neoliberal and capitalist mindset – performance-focused, individual success, gendered division of labour, et cetera – than we would have confessed.”

The pressure to be productive is one reason why people over-involve themselves in activism, which leads to the previously mentioned hoarding of power.

This dynamic calls for feminist and anti-capitalist ethics of care: focusing on and acknowledging effort and impact rather than performance or outcome; encouraging interdependence through shared and rotating tasks; and affirming and supporting members regardless of their level of output.

### 4.

#### LANGUAGE AND ACCESSIBILITY

“Not everyone has the lingo and the politically correct and appropriate language, which often excludes people,” Ani laments. “Right now, structures are not conducive to those who are marginalized by the issue. They cannot take the space in a meaningful way.”

Academic language doesn't resonate with many working-class communities – usually, it only serves to show off the speaker's

privilege of being university educated. Demanding that everyone use the most recent iteration of politically correct language, concepts, and jargon can alienate the directly affected people, whose grounding in the issues comes from personal experience.

Of course, this isn't to say that we should excuse people who repeatedly and deliberately use archaic language that's hurtful or false. For example, it's essential that group members respect people's pronouns or ways to describe their gender and sexuality.

In an *Everyday Feminism* article on how to make social justice less elitist and more accessible, Kai Cheng Thom details the need to create accessible spaces in terms of physical and economic accessibility, in addition to language: “We also need to ensure that folks with children, people on welfare and fixed incomes, and basically anyone who might not have access to a lot of money and time can participate in community building.”

### 5.

#### EMOTIONAL LABOUR

It's no secret that our organizing spaces exist within and alongside systems of oppression at the intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality, and disability. We see burnout among women organizers – especially women of colour – because sexism and racism exist in organizing spaces in a way that reflects broader systems of gendered and racial oppression. Emotional labour is overwhelmingly borne by women-identified folks and women of colour even while it is devalued.

“In most activist circles, there is a theoretical understanding of power relations, oppressions, and privileges,” explains Brunet. “[Though we may] denounce the systems of oppression that structure our lives, it is sometimes much more complex to recognize when these same systems slip into our interpersonal relationships and our intimate relationships.”

To dismantle these oppressions more broadly, we need to be careful that the responsibility of care and relational work within groups doesn't fall solely on women – especially women of colour – who take it on in addition to gritty organizing work. Within many groups, women tend to fight for the health of a group, sometimes to the detriment of their personal well-being, while men – especially white men – leave the group when things get tough.

“So much of our relationships are around the organizing work that we don't know the people with whom we organize. We don't have time and space for having holistic relationships. We have no idea what other things people are going through. This rhythm doesn't allow us to build solidarity with each other,” reflects Ani, with concern.

She suggests, “We need to think about how people around us are doing; we need to get away from professionalism, [where] all that matters is organizing work – we come, we meet, we have tasks, and then it's like we don't really know each other.”



## FURTHERING COLLECTIVE CARE

We've found that the common thread between groups with poor practices of care is a lack of open communication between group members – and often the biggest challenge is to get people to sit together and have conversations about these issues.

Starting regular meetings with a check-in – where each member shares how they're doing, what's on their minds, and whether they have specific needs during the meeting – can be a good way to foreground care and help strengthen the group. Outside of meetings, authentic discussions and genuine solidarity can start with a simple but sincere "how are you doing?" Finding allies within the group can also help build a culture of care.

Check-ins aren't always enough to get to the root of issues, though. It can be useful to create a structured space dedicated to discussing people's feelings and care needs. In over five years of Politics & Care work, we've found that inviting an external facilitator (someone from Politics & Care, for example) allows for in-depth discussions that can lead to healing. On occasion, we've conversed with members individually on having difficult conversations with the group. Sometimes it took months or even years before a group was able to hold a collective care meeting where members felt heard. In other cases, we've witnessed groups where members push for a collective care meeting to address problematic group dynamics, but those very dynamics – a devaluation of care work, or a capitalist work ethos – led other members to dismiss concerns and refuse to make time for the meeting.

In 2017, Politics & Care published a set of prompts for groups looking to reflect on their culture of care (or lack thereof) in "Caring about thriving," featured in the student-community resource, *Convergence Journal*. Those questions, and the above strategies, can make a difference in how people feel in activist groups and in the long-term sustainability of our movements. The challenges we face in the world are enormous, and taking them on requires that we look after one another. ★

*\*Names have been changed*



**RUSHDIA MEHREEN** is an organizer based in Tiohtià:ke/Montreal, on unceded Kanien'kehà:ka territories. For over a decade she has been involved in various social justice struggles, including Palestine/anticolonial solidarity, the Quebec student movement, migrant justice, and anti-racist organizing. Currently a college teacher in a precarious capacity, she tweets sporadically at @rushmew.



**DAVID GRAY-DONALD** is the publisher of *Briarpatch Magazine*. He is a settler living on Treaty 4 territory in Regina, Saskatchewan.



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Alberta minister of economic development and trade,  
Deron Bilous, opens the Global Petroleum Show.



# CHECKING IN WITH THE OIL CROWD

At the 50th annual Global Petroleum Show, are they planning a post-oil world, or digging into climate destruction?

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY DAVID GRAY-DONALD

I'm searching for the low-carbon energy transition, and I've either ended up at the exact right or wrong place.

Six weeks ago, *Briarpatch* received a generic invite letter to the 50<sup>th</sup> annual Global Petroleum Show, "NORTH AMERICA'S LEADING ENERGY EVENT," and my curiosity got the best of me. As someone who's reported on climate

justice for years, I decided to make a trip into the belly of the beast to see what the oil business is doing to propel the low-carbon energy transition, or to hinder it.

So now I'm at the Calgary Stampede grounds, on Treaty 7 territory, trying to make sense of what the people gathered here believe is next for their industry – and, by consequence, our planet. The

conference guidebook tells me we're here "CELEBRATING THE FUTURE OF ENERGY." Excuse my skepticism.

On the first morning of the three-day conference, I wander the red carpets at the entrance. A maze of booths lines the exhibition space, hawking everything from valves to technology companies to countries. Xylem: "Let's Solve



Water." Energyn: "The Extreme Process Equipment Manufacturing Company." State of Louisiana: "Louisiana Is Energy." The hundreds of booths continue on like this through one football field-sized room, through a corridor, and into another football field-sized room.

## I CAME LOOKING FOR EVIDENCE OF A DECLINE, BUT THE ONLY QUESTION AT THE START OF THE PETROLEUM SHOW, I'M REALIZING, IS HOW FAST THE OIL AND GAS INDUSTRY WILL GROW.

What I came for, though, is the smaller, more exclusive Business & Technical Conference, where executives and politicians are giving keynotes and sitting on panels discussing the future of the industry. Entry costs \$795 for the three days.

In my application for a media pass, I included a *Briarpatch* article I recently co-authored that argues for nationalizing Saskatchewan's oil, winding the industry down, and returning the land to Indigenous peoples ("Socializing and Decolonizing Saskatchewan's Oil," with Emily Eaton). I wonder: is anyone else here thinking seriously about proposals for the managed decline of the industry? I also wonder if the organizers are watching me, worried I'll protest and chain myself to the excavation truck plastered with Calgary Flames decals that's on display in the parking lot.

Inside the Business & Technical Conference, I pour myself a complimentary coffee and carry it past the breakfast pastries and the black leather couches to find a seat in the chandeliered conference room.

After a welcome from Blackfoot Confederacy Elder Leonard Bastien, wearing full regalia, the Alberta NDP minister of economic development and trade, Deron Bilous, takes the stage in suit and tie. He declares that no pipeline project has ever had as much certainty of completion as the Trans Mountain pipeline now does.

It's June 12, about two weeks since Trudeau's Liberals promised to buy the Trans Mountain pipeline from Kinder Morgan with the intention of selling it to

another investor. Bilous goes on to praise Alberta's first NDP premier, Rachel Notley, as the industry's biggest champion. Notley will address the crowd later in the day, in full petro-capitalist mode, to "talk about what we've done to rally Canadians in support of this project, to

build certainty for investors, and to make sure the pipeline gets built," as she puts it.

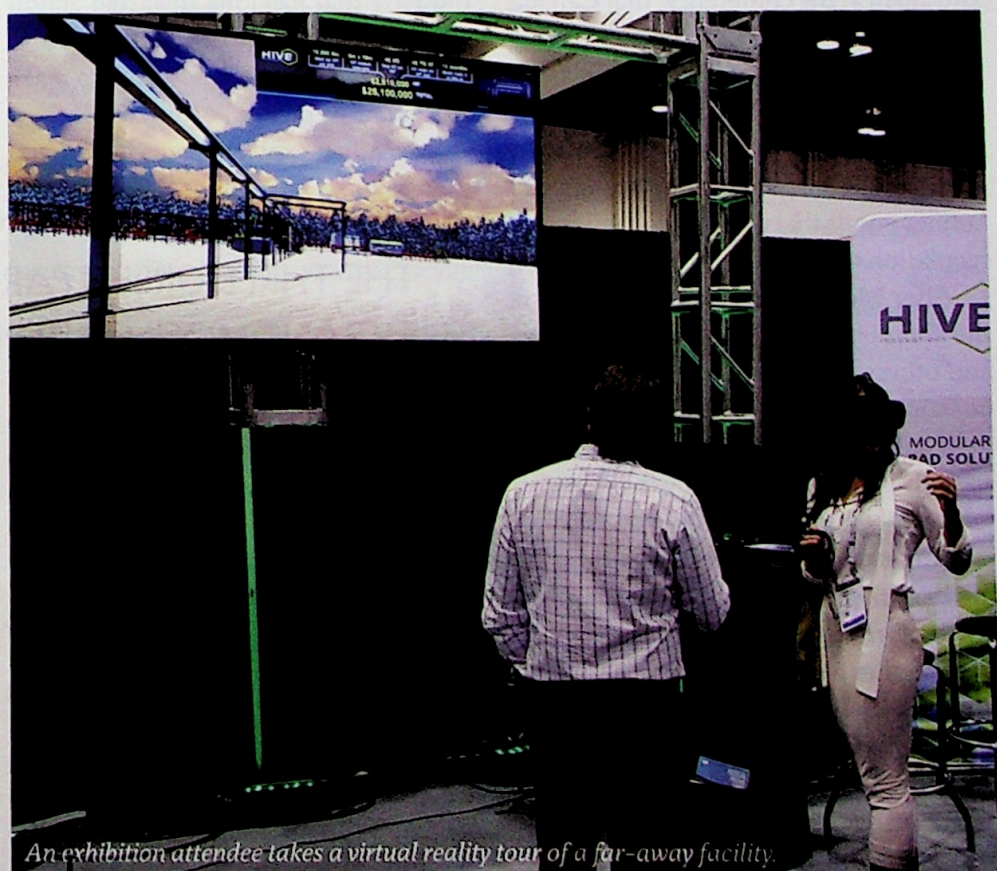
Next up after Bilous, and sporting a nearly identical crew cut and dark suit, is Tim McMillan, president and CEO of the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP), an industry association and lobbying group. McMillan announces CAPP's oil production forecast to 2035, as per a report released that morning: 5.6 million barrels per day (bpd) of oil production in Canada by 2035, up 1.4 million bpd from today.

Most of that comes from tarsands growth, which CAPP believes will balloon from 2.7 million bpd today to 4.2 million bpd in 2035. These numbers are a decrease from CAPP's projections in 2014, when a barrel of oil cost over \$100, but the 2018 forecast is higher than last year's.

McMillan, a former minister of energy and resources with the conservative Saskatchewan Party, tells the crowd he personally thinks "Canada can do better" than this. By "better," he means produce more oil than what CAPP predicts.

I came looking for evidence of a decline, but the only question at the start of the Petroleum Show, I'm realizing, is how fast the oil and gas industry will grow. The crowd nods along.

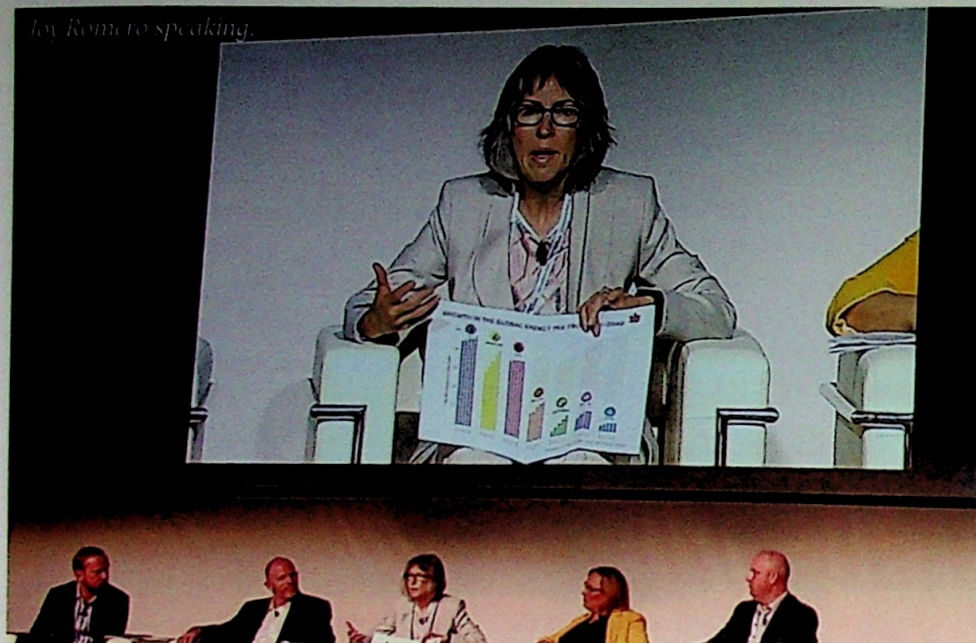
McMillan takes aim at opponents of the industry in what seem like carefully crafted – if misleading – phrases. He paints the opposition to Trans Mountain as foreign-funded agitation by pointing to the environmental group 350.org, which has organized rallies against the project (350.org as an international organization does receive U.S. foundation funding, but there are many First Nations opposing the



An exhibition attendee takes a virtual reality tour of a far-away facility.



by Romero speaking.



project, as well as local settler environmental groups, none of which are foreign-funded). He also claims only three people in B.C. – the three Green Party MLAs – are blocking the Trans Mountain pipeline from being built, erasing the validity of Indigenous land title and downplaying the widespread opposition.

Then McMillan leans into a piece of well-worn rhetoric that comes up again and again at the conference: that Canada is the most responsible, regulated energy producer in the world. I bite back the counter-examples that spring to mind, the most recent being a *Narwhal* article about how Alberta keeps approving toxic tailings ponds that don't follow provincial regulations.

After McMillan's talk, reporters from the *Calgary Herald*, CTV, Bloomberg, and others jostle for his attention. They question how confident CAPP is about their projections (pretty confident), the attractiveness of Canadian oil for investors (could be better), whether the government is doing enough to support the industry (he likes the Trans Mountain purchase, but wants more pro-business regulations), and whether all three currently proposed export pipelines – Trans Mountain, Enbridge's Line 3, and TransCanada's Keystone XL – are needed to reach the projected 2035 production level (yes, absolutely, and as it turns out, McMillan also

wants to see TransCanada's failed Energy East pipeline resurrected to get Alberta oil to the East Coast).

I jump in. "You announced a large increase to 2035. When is the rapid decrease? When are we getting off of oil? When are we going to save the climate?"

It's the only climate-related question of the scrum. I figure it's at least plausible that this massive and hugely profitable industry that has long thwarted action on climate *could* turn its attention to addressing the challenge. I want to make space for this possibility.

McMillan explains that according to

## MCMILLAN CLAIMS ONLY THREE PEOPLE IN B.C. – THE THREE GREEN PARTY MLAS – ARE BLOCKING THE TRANS MOUNTAIN PIPELINE FROM BEING BUILT.

an International Energy Agency (IEA) scenario of future energy use, global oil and gas production is expected to increase to 2040. "So our forecast doesn't show a decline. It shows an increase." He makes no mention of whether we're ever going to see a decline, let alone a full winding down of the industry.

CAPP uses the IEA's New Policies Scenario as a baseline. By the IEA's own admission, the New Policies Scenario, which would see emissions grow significantly to 2040, "is far from enough to

avoid severe impacts of climate change." It crashes through the Paris climate agreement goal of limiting warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, with an upper threshold of 2 degrees Celsius. The IEA also has a separate Sustainable Development Scenario, which in 2040 sees emissions decreased to 59 per cent of what they are in the New Policy Scenario. An additional "Faster Transition" IEA scenario lays out an even more rapid weaning from fossil fuels that would give a better chance of achieving the Paris goal. But these last two scenarios aren't how CAPP, and its oil-producing member companies, choose to see the future.

## DIGGING IN

Joy Romero, a VP at oil company Canadian Natural Resources Ltd, begins her remarks on the "Leaders in Sustainability: Responsible Hydrocarbon Production" panel discussion the next day by holding up a folded piece of paper with a chart on it. It shows a vision of the global energy supply mix from now to 2040. Her soft speaking style and use of a book-like visual aid reminds me of a librarian addressing a classroom. The graphic on the chart is designed by CAPP, but the numbers are based on the IEA's climate-frying New Policies Scenario. Romero highlights Canada's opportuni-

ties to provide oil and gas in this scenario.

The panellists discuss made-in-Alberta innovations that are reducing the emissions intensity of tarsands extraction. "The oilsands is a net exporter of not just oil, but of ideas," proclaims Rod Stearn, Canadian director of a General Electric-owned oil company. The panellists don't get stuck on the fact that it's still oil they're talking about.

I write in a question. It gets collected by a broadcast journalism graduate I spoke with earlier, while I was searching in vain



for anyone at the conference critical of the industry. He hadn't been able to find work in journalism, so decided to seek out a job in oil and gas. (He asked whether *Briarpatch* is an industry publication. "No," I answered.) To my surprise, the moderator asks my question to the panellists.

"Seeing as royalties and tax rates are so low in Canada and there is no plan to funnel profits into the energy transition – this is good, controversial, I like it – would you propose we put much more profit into an energy transition fund? If

our infrastructure, all of those things – if our natural resources weren't there tomorrow, our standard of living would be significantly different. So, besides the thing to specific funds, that means our universities as a whole, regardless, are receiving funds as a result of the royalties. So, as a Canadian, as a grandmother of seven, I would love to see the responsible way in which we harvest our natural resources within Canada continue as long as possible, because I know what that means. It means prosperity and quality of

## "THE OILSANDS IS A NET EXPORTER OF NOT JUST OIL, BUT OF IDEAS."

not, how else will oil fund the transition?"

Joy Romero takes a go. She starts by emphasizing the industry's leadership in clean tech, citing an impressive-sounding figure: in 2016, of the \$2 billion spent on clean tech research and development in Canada, \$1.65 billion of that was spent by the oil and gas industry. (The real number is \$1.45 billion.) But these investments aren't about developing ways to transition away from fossil fuels – rather, they're developing ways to make oil and gas production a bit less dirty (for example, by getting emissions from tarsands extraction down to the international average). Somehow, though, new oil extraction methods are still considered "clean tech." I've been hearing this kind of buzzword- and statistics-dropping a lot here – the kind that sounds reassuring, until you dig up the real meaning.

Romero then turns to what she sees as our economic dependence on oil and gas.

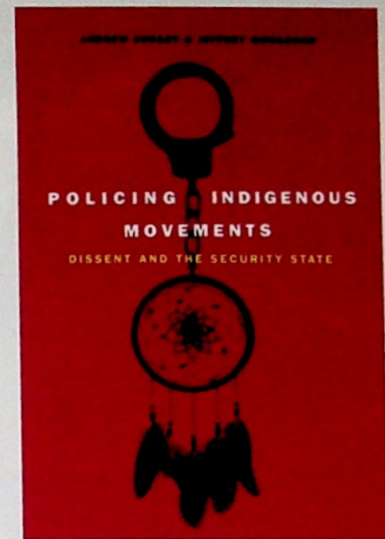
"When we talk about the energy transition – because obviously you're going to run out at some time – I hope you hear from me that I mean by running out. Because one of the things that I also – if you tomorrow basically turned off the oil and gas industry and the royalties – and if you think it's a small number, it isn't a small number – every single Canadian is paid for the use of fossil fuel. We, every single Canadian is not paid for the use of sun or wind – so the generation of just general coffers to our health, our society,

life for my children and my grandchildren and great-grandchildren, hopefully."

Climate considerations aside, this logic of prosperity being dependent on oil revenues is debunked by Meenal Shrivastava in her chapter in the 2015 book *Alberta Oil and the Decline of Democracy in Canada* by comparing Norway and Alberta. "Despite the rise of right-wing politics recently, Norway's high taxes continue to fund its welfare model, while almost all of the oil revenue goes into the Norwegian sovereign wealth fund," writes Shrivastava. "In contrast to this approach of sharing the resource rent with future generations, Alberta's low tax rate ensures that it must use oil royalties to fund current government expenditures, enabling the entrenchment of neoliberal policies and the chronic boom-bust economic cycles." Alberta keeps its taxes low and burns through its oil royalties (which are set at bargain rates) nearly every year, while Norway proves that it's entirely possible to use high tax rates to fund social programs like health care and education, and to leave oil royalties untouched.

The reliance on oil, specifically tarsands oil, is particularly absurd when we realize that the tarsands have only been a major industry in Canada since about 2004. Canada consistently ranked at the very top of quality-of-life indexes internationally for years before that (including most of the 1990s, when Canada produced less than half the oil it does now) – though

## NOW AVAILABLE



### Policing Indigenous Movements

Dissent and the Security State

by Andrew Crosby & Jeffrey Monaghan

From land struggles to struggles against resource extraction, pipeline development and fracking, land and water defenders have created a national discussion about these issues and successfully slowed the rate of resource extraction. Crosby and Monaghan use the Access to Information Act to interrogate how policing and other security agencies have been monitoring, cataloguing and working to silence Indigenous land defenders and other opponents of extractive capitalism.



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those rankings clearly didn't reflect conditions, for example, in First Nations communities bearing the brunt of colonial dispossession and enforced poverty.

Romero's message to the petroleum show crowd was that Alberta and Canada should rely on oil royalties for social programs long into the future, possibly until the oil runs out. Given that Canada has the third-largest proven reserves of oil in the world, that's a long time – and the earth could be fried by then if monumental action isn't taken. But by advocating for continued oil dependence, both energetic and economic, Romero shuts down the possibility for transition.

Fellow panellist Meghan Harris-Ngae, who works on climate and sustainability at EY Canada, jumps in to say she doesn't think a separate fund is necessary. "I think the industry is going to fund the transition."

Romero's argument for staying on oil long into the future is complemented here by Harris-Ngae – in effect telling us to trust the industry. The lie is both that it will look after us economically, and will make the low-carbon transition happen when it's needed, at its own speed.

### BUILDING A NARRATIVE

Though it's clear industry leaders want to hold on to oil and gas extraction indefinitely, they appear to be determined to broadcast a message of responsibility and green leadership. What exactly does this public relations campaign look like? A lunchtime presentation is given by Stephen Buffalo, president of the Indian Resource Council of Canada. The main conference room, packed earlier, is now nearly empty for Buffalo.

But some people are listening. Buffalo thanks all the oil and gas industry

Eriel Deranger, an Indigenous woman of the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation who has been an unflagging critic of the oil industry in her home region in northern Alberta, recently reflected on why leaders in her community, after decades of opposing the industry alongside her, have had a change of heart. "My community, just like the other Cree, Dene, and Métis communities that have stepped up in support of this atrocious industry, have been forced into a corner through years of concerted pressure by oil and gas companies in collusion with government

THE LIE IS BOTH THAT THE OIL INDUSTRY WILL  
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associations for speaking out in support of development, saying Canadians and Indigenous people want these projects, lumping everyone together. He says for his people who are in dire straits, they need the oil and gas industry.

to accept the tarsands as our fate."

Buffalo's speech ends by stressing his support for oil and gas development, and the supposed support of Indigenous peoples writ large. A short white guy in a suit and tie approaches him in the aisle,



shakes his hand firmly, and says, very loudly, "Great message! Great message!"

*Calgary Herald* columnist Chris Varcoe talks to Buffalo as well, and that week pens an article quoting Buffalo at length about how to involve First Nations to get the Trans Mountain pipeline built – namely, through having First Nations own it.

The next day opens with a talk on sustainability in business competitiveness, sponsored by German industrial manu-

No one seems to consider that the industry's image problem exists because the industry is a legitimate problem.

"We're in the business of life here," says Lance Mortlock, national oil and gas strategy services leader at EY Canada, during one panel. At a later panel, moderator John Gorman, a Canadian VP at Halliburton, riffs with Chris Bloomer, president and CEO of the Canadian Energy Pipeline Association:

## NO ONE SEEMS TO CONSIDER THAT THE INDUSTRY'S IMAGE PROBLEM EXISTS BECAUSE THE INDUSTRY IS A LEGITIMATE PROBLEM.

facturing company Siemens ("Ingenuity For Life"). Bob Dixon, Siemens USA's head of sustainability – and also the head of a division of their Oil, Gas and Petrochemical Center of Competence – tells us he's excited about the willingness of the CEOs of big companies like BP to brand themselves not as oil and gas companies, but energy companies. "I think we need to reinvent ourselves."

"I think you've got an image problem. I think we have an image problem," he tells the audience, sitting in a white leather armchair and sporting a goatee.

He wants the industry to see environmentalists as allies to be worked with – a view I've heard frequently in corporate social responsibility (CSR) circles, but a deviation from some other speakers who see environmentalists as enemies. Dixon also encourages the industry to emphasize what it is doing in terms of sustainability.

"Absolutely," says the moderator of Dixon's discussion, Damarys Zampini, president of Sustainable Strategy Solutions. "I believe in some ways we've lost pride in what we do. Certainly our country, and really North America, has so much to be proud of on the responsibility that we take, and sustainability as a whole, and our people." The next day, Zampini runs the kids programming at the conference for a group of 12- to 17-year-olds, to "inspire the industry's future leaders."

Gorman: "The business of life, we really sound good that way."

Bloomer: "Absolutely."

Gorman: "Who wouldn't want to be in that business?"

Bloomer: "Absolutely."

Gorman: "Better than being in the business of death."

Some in the crowd laugh, maybe nervously. I cough loudly.

I take a walk through the exhibition space to talk to people working the booths. The renewables zone has just five booths. There are about as many booths doing pro-oil "grassroots" PR work, battling to win over the hearts and minds of people in Canada. One booth is giving out stickers that shout "I HEART CANADIAN OIL & GAS," and another is trying to get people excited about how many things in our society are made of petroleum.

Feeling nearly crushed by the rhetoric and the sheer immensity of it all, but wanting to see the show through to its end, I head to the official Petroleum Show party, in another massive building of the Stampede grounds. A nerdy band from Texas, The Spazmatics, plays upbeat, safe covers of "Take On Me" and "Don't You Want Me Baby," interspersed with AC/DC guitar riffs. After nearly every song they lean on the audience clap track. Eventually some people genuinely get into it, dancing together.

Between songs, the head of the event

coordination team for the Petroleum Show, Nick Samain, takes the stage to give a cheque for \$7,500 to the local Ronald McDonald House, based on proceeds from the night.

The realization strikes me, as I take in this scene, that this is a community, like so many others, where people are searching for connection and for purpose. A wave of fear pours over me as I let it sink in just how big this community is, and how seemingly unshakeable they are in their sense of purpose – a purpose they are all collectively reinforcing.

I wonder: what would this future-focused gathering look like if its vision of the future included climate justice? The imperative of getting off fossil fuels would of course be the guiding focus – as would building resilience in communities bearing the brunt of climate change – using the profits of the fossil fuel industry.

It's not impossible for the people here to demand a rapid transition to a low-carbon economy, with hundreds of thousands of green jobs, and true respect for Indigenous sovereignty. I tried to see if that was on the agenda here, if that transition was something people were working on seriously and taking pride in. I didn't find it.

As I walk out of the party, nerves just about shot, I pull out an emergency cigarette and ask for a light from a crowd of guys in suits, one of whom is Samain, who was just on stage.

"Thanks for coming to cover the show," he says. "How are you liking it?"

Before I can respond, a tall man next to him bellows, "It's fucking awesome, isn't it?!" ★

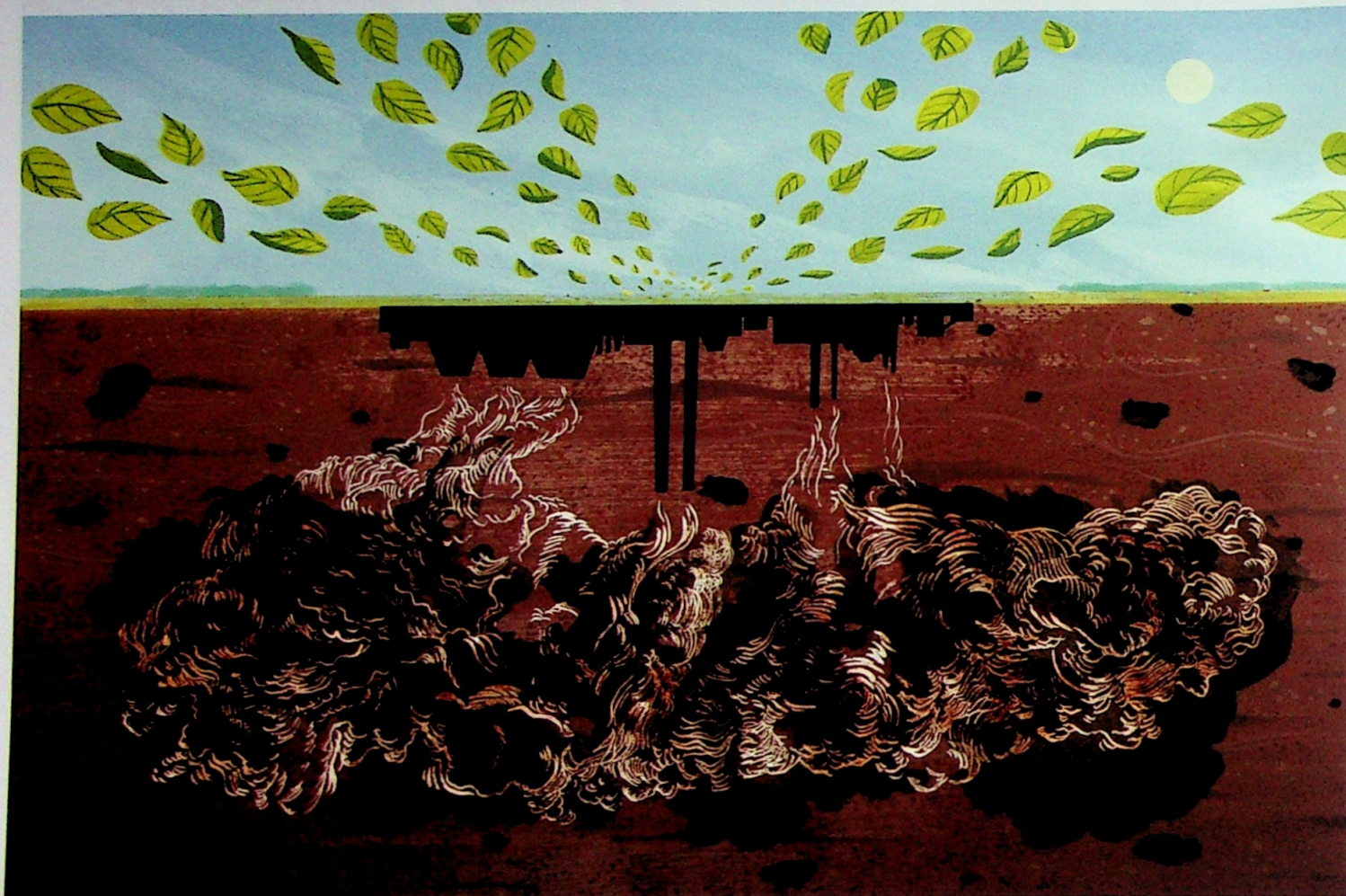
*For more on the oil industry's 'grassroots' PR campaigns, next hotspots for extraction, and forays into digital disruption, check out our online-only accompanying articles at [www.briarpatchmagazine.com](http://www.briarpatchmagazine.com).*



**DAVID GRAY-DONALD** is the publisher of *Briarpatch Magazine*. He is a settler living on Treaty 4 territory in Regina, Saskatchewan.



# BURN NOW,



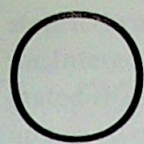
# BURY LATER

BY LAURA STEWART

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ERIN MCCLUSKEY

Could the sediments of Western Canada take some of our emissions back, and save us from climate disaster?



n the Canadian Prairies, wheat and canola fields lie flat as quilt squares on a bed. Beneath them stretch layer after increasingly ancient layer of sediment, going down thousands of metres to porous sandstone, still holding the water of inland seas that were here before the dinosaurs. Some of these rock layers extend hundreds of kilometres across southern Saskatchewan and into Alberta, Manitoba, and the U.S.. Less porous layers block fluids from moving upward, and have kept oil and gas trapped beneath them for millions of years – until humans learned to drill well bores to get the hydrocarbons out.

Now, as we teeter on the brink of climate disaster, we're drilling even deeper wells in a desperate attempt to put the carbon dioxide that's warming our planet back under the ground.

## BLOWING SMOKE

This spring, the amount of carbon dioxide ( $\text{CO}_2$ ) in our atmosphere crashed through yet another scary round number threshold – averaging above 410 parts per million (ppm) for a full month. In the late 1800s, the level was around 290 ppm. Scientists don't expect it to fall below 400 ppm again in our lifetimes.

Canadians have been hearing about  $\text{CO}_2$  emissions for decades, at least since Canada hosted the first international conference on global warming in Toronto in 1988. Since then, Canada and other nations have set and missed one new target after another, each time pledging even more drastic reductions than before.

Now emissions need to drop toward zero, fast. For low-lying nations already seeing the effects of sea-level rise, or tropical nations already facing heat waves pushing the limits of human physiology, it could mean their survival. In countries like Canada, emissions should drop even faster, to make room for a more gradual transition to green energy in the Global South, where energy from fossil fuels currently means both survival and growth.

But many researchers and policymakers have already given up on zero emissions as a goal for the next few decades. Instead, their plan is to drop *below* zero – later.

In more and more scientific models of our future, we go beyond reducing emissions to actually reversing them, creating "negative emissions" – that is, more carbon being stored than released.

But these hopeful plans rely on technologies that still don't exist – at least not beyond a few pilots and some tantalizing concepts. Compared to the way renewable energy technology has leapt forward, negative emissions technology has crawled.

The physical process used in carbon capture is actually older

than the international movement to reduce emissions. As early as the 1920s, industrial facilities needed to separate  $\text{CO}_2$  out of a mixture of other gases. For instance, natural gas is mostly methane, but it can also contain some  $\text{CO}_2$  as an impurity, sometimes at high enough levels that the gas company must separate it out before they can sell the fuel.

A coal-fired generating station also produces a mixture of gases. Air used to burn the coal includes some oxygen, which combines with the carbon in the coal to produce  $\text{CO}_2$ . But air is not pure oxygen, so the exhaust gases contain both  $\text{CO}_2$  and a large amount of nitrogen. A carbon-capture facility passes these mixed gases through a solvent to selectively remove the  $\text{CO}_2$ , and then uses heat to drive the  $\text{CO}_2$  back out. That step cleans the solvent for reuse, and produces relatively pure  $\text{CO}_2$  that can be stored – or sold.

In the 1970s, oil companies started pumping compressed, liquid-like  $\text{CO}_2$  down wells into oil reservoirs, where it helps dissolve more oil out of the rock pores and move it toward the producing wells. The process, called enhanced oil recovery (EOR), increases the amount of oil that can be produced before the field becomes uneconomical.

In Saskatchewan, an EOR project at the Weyburn-Midale oilfield buys most of the  $\text{CO}_2$  captured at SaskPower's flagship carbon-capture project, Unit 3 at the Boundary Dam generating station near Estevan. Although some  $\text{CO}_2$  flows with the oil and returns to the surface (where it is captured for reuse), some stays in the reservoir, which can be considered "carbon storage." After the reservoir stops producing oil, it could still be used for further storage. All this assumes the  $\text{CO}_2$  will stay put – a reasonable-sounding assumption, when you consider that oil tends to move upward away from the greater pressures at greater depths, and that less-porous cap rock

above the reservoir has prevented that movement for millions of years. But now numerous oil wells pierce the cap rock, creating potential pathways for leaks. Once a well is no longer useful, the oil company seals it with cement. How well the  $\text{CO}_2$  stays put depends on how well those cement seals have been made, and how closely the field will be monitored over the hundreds or thousands of years we want the stuff to stay buried.

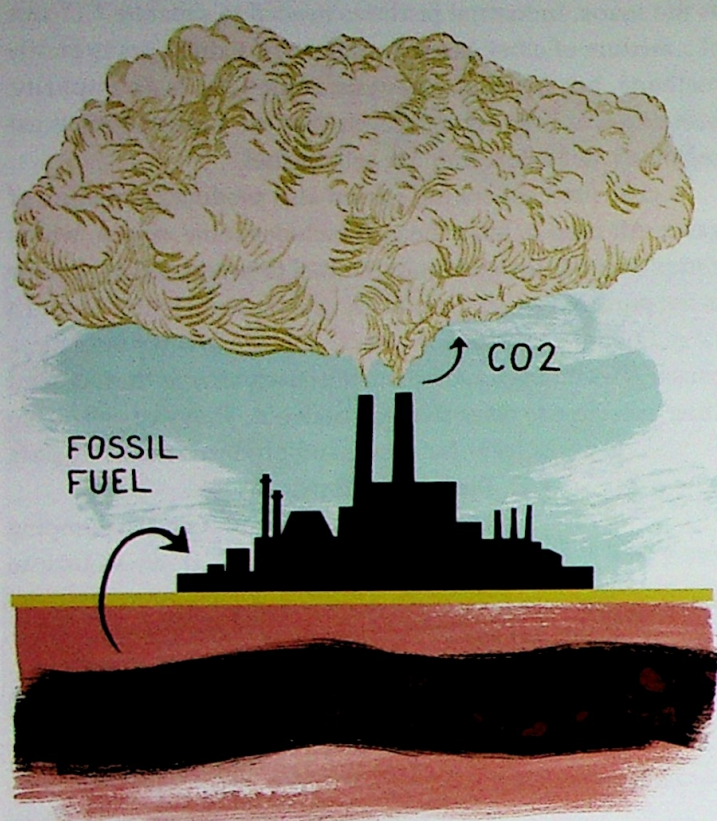
## DOWN A DEEPER WELL

When the oil company at Weyburn-Midale isn't buying  $\text{CO}_2$ , Boundary Dam Unit 3 comes closer to zero emissions. That's because, instead of helping to extract more oil, the captured  $\text{CO}_2$  goes to a dedicated storage site called Aquistore.

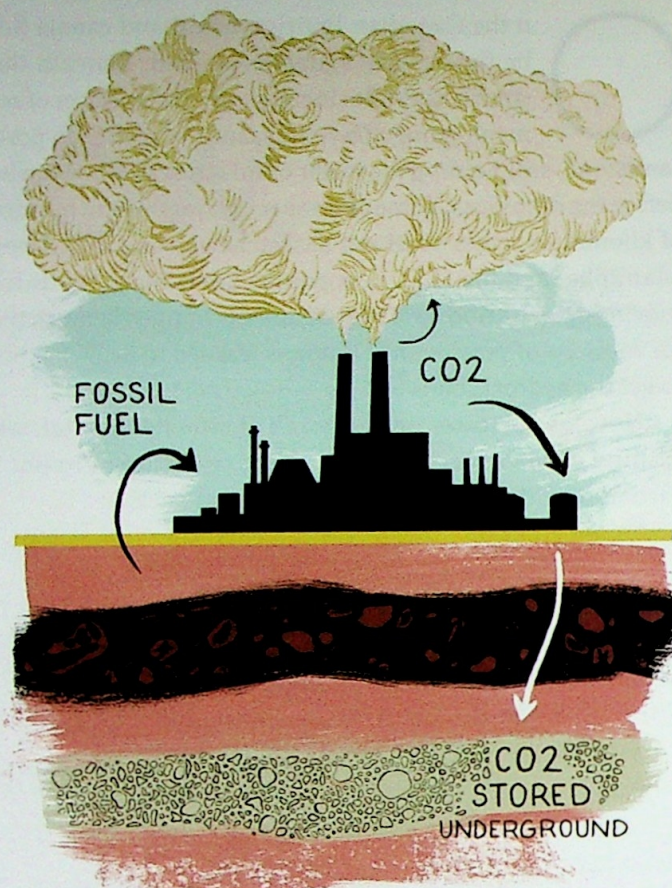
The research project, spearheaded by the Regina-based non-profit Petroleum Technology Research Centre (PTRC),

Now, as we  
teeter on the  
brink of climate  
disaster, we're  
drilling even  
deeper wells  
in a desperate  
attempt to put  
the carbon  
dioxide that's  
warming our  
planet back  
under the  
ground.





NO CO2 CAPTURE



CARBON CAPTURE AND STORAGE (CCS)

injects the unsold  $\text{CO}_2$  into the deeper Deadwood Formation, a reservoir of porous rock filled with salt water almost 3.2 km below the surface.

When I spoke to Norm Sacuta, PTRC's communications director, he was preparing to tour a group of visitors around the facility near Estevan. He showed me a picture of the injection well: a pipe into the ground, topped with several bolt-studded fittings, looking not unlike the wellhead on a conventional oil well. Next to it, visitors see a building with meters and valves to measure and control the amount of  $\text{CO}_2$  being injected. "Then I take them up a small rise, through the tick-infested grass, to a super-station that's located nearby," Sacuta says. There they see some of the monitoring equipment intended to detect potential unwanted changes around the injection site, such as uplift (from unintended pressure buildup) and earth movements (from sudden surges underground, or worse, from rock fractures).

At several shallow wells there, researchers can collect samples of gases and water in the ground, to test for substances they don't want escaping from deeper layers. Visitors also

get to see a geophone, part of a permanent array of detectors used to pick up seismic vibrations. Some of the vibrations are natural (such as those from distant earthquakes) and others are induced – researchers deliberately apply vibrations to the earth and record the echoes to create an image of where the  $\text{CO}_2$  has moved out from the injection well. And if pressure from the injections should happen to fracture rock layers, the geophones would "hear" it.

Sacuta says that unlike oil production, where fracturing or "fracking" subterranean rocks with high pressures can be useful to extract oil, a fracture in the sandstone layer here could actually break connections between pores in the rock, limiting the flow of  $\text{CO}_2$  into the available storage space around the well. And of course they don't want to break the rock layer above that prevents the  $\text{CO}_2$  from leaking upward and back into the atmosphere. All the monitoring helps to verify the researchers' prediction that the enormous Deadwood Formation can take in and hold large volumes of  $\text{CO}_2$ .

If we can find a way to pull large amounts of carbon back out of the air, we will need more deep saline reservoirs like this to

**If we can find  
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store it. In a 2005 report on carbon capture and storage (CCS), the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) estimated that known oil and gas reservoirs could only accept up to 900 gigatonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>, or less than half the amount of captured carbon that most scenarios assume will need to be stored. Undiscovered fields might add another 25 per cent, but the IPCC also noted that most oilfield storage capacity would not be available until after the oil is pumped out. But reservoirs like the Deadwood Formation could accommodate at least another 1,000 gigatonnes worldwide, and possibly up to 10 times that amount. And because saline reservoirs are deeper than oil reservoirs, they have fewer potential paths for CO<sub>2</sub> to leak out. Instead, over thousands of years, it will dissolve into the salty water and begin to sink instead of pressing upward against the cap rock. Over millions of years, some of it will react chemically to become part of the surrounding rock.

## OUT OF A WIDER SKY

Southeast of Calgary, Alberta, where the acreages thin out into wheat fields, the Shepard Energy Centre burns natural gas to power the city. A new facility opened here in May to capture CO<sub>2</sub> and provide it to researchers – the press release says technologies tested there could eventually capture “up to 50 per cent” of Alberta’s emissions.

That number hardly seems something to celebrate, when it still means almost 130 megatonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> from Canada’s top greenhouse gas-emitting province would go uncaptured each year. It highlights one of the most stubborn issues with carbon-capture technology to date: it tackles only the easiest part of the problem, the large point sources, leaving millions of tailpipes and small chimneys untouched, and doing nothing to capture what’s already out there warming the atmosphere and acidifying the oceans.

But there may be an even easier place to catch carbon than from coal- or gas-fired generating stations: harvesting it from plants.

Plants take in CO<sub>2</sub>, water, and photons of light to make carbohydrates – the starting point for growing everything from starchy grains to wood fibre. When such plant matter dies and decays, it releases carbon back into the atmosphere. But burning it for energy in a CCS facility would divert a stream of carbon from the natural cycle, and send it back into geologic storage.

This approach, known as bioenergy with carbon capture and storage, or BECCS, caught my attention. I could immediately picture how it would work. Relying on a natural process rather than hoping to invent a new one sounded humble – and humility is in short shrift when it comes to human-made solutions

to climate change. With suitable reservoirs to store CO<sub>2</sub>, plus helpful oil-industry knowledge of things like drilling and underground imaging, Saskatchewan and Alberta are in a unique position to become part of the BECCS solution instead of leading the emissions problem.

But if plants can capture carbon, why wouldn’t we just let them store it? Leaves pull in carbon, and roots and soil microbes hold it. In Western Canada, farmers have learned to plow prairie soil less, in hopes that it will slowly regain lost carbon. There’s plenty of room here to plant trees that can live – and capture carbon – for hundreds of years.

But when plants die, carbon is released again. Planted trees can be cut down, restored grasslands can be plowed again, and incentives for soil-building farm practices can be cancelled. Climate change itself threatens to kill or weaken plants with new outbreaks of insects and disease, increased wildfires, and droughts.

Unlike forest- and soil-building projects, BECCS schemes hold out the tantalizing possibility of locking up carbon permanently. But of course, they have their own complications. Hadi Dowlatabadi, a professor at the University of British Columbia, has been studying the tangled trade-offs of social, economic, and environmental systems for decades.

“The problem is, as soon as you start using bioenergy,” Dowlatabadi tells me, “what you are actually doing is you’re capturing the photons which plants store for you from sunlight.” And that puts bioenergy crops in competition with other crops, and with non-crop plant life.

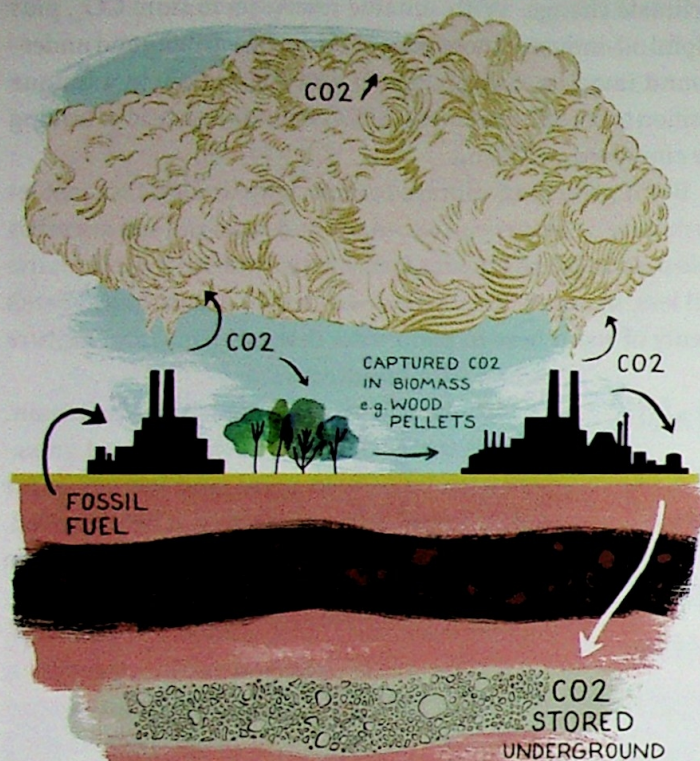
Warren Mabee, an energy policy researcher at Queen’s University, argues that bioenergy crops won’t take much land away from food crops because the latter command much higher market prices – although that could change if the government put a high enough tax on carbon emissions.

But before they compete with food crops, bioenergy crops may threaten natural habitats and biodiversity. Dowlatabadi says the biggest threat to biodiversity is agriculture expanding at its own margins. Palm oil can be used for biodiesel, and in Southeast Asia, plantations of oil palms have replaced mangrove swamps. With rising demand for corn ethanol to meet renewable fuel standards in the U.S., farmers have expanded corn production, often into grassland previously restored from cropland under conservation reserve programs. Mabee says we need strong, well-designed policy to make sure that BECCS projects can create new storage without displacing or destroying natural carbon storage that is already under threat.

Rather than picturing large land areas given over to bioenergy production, Mabee looks for any recently living material – called

With suitable reservoirs to store CO<sub>2</sub>, plus helpful oil-industry knowledge of drilling and underground imaging, Saskatchewan and Alberta are in a position to become part of the BECCS solution, instead of leading the emissions problem.





### BIO-ENERGY WITH CARBON CAPTURE AND STORAGE (BECCS)

biomass – that can be used as fuel. In a 2014 working paper, Mabee reviewed possible sources of biomass across Canada, including not only crops for liquid fuels and tree plantations for wood pellets, but also agricultural residues like straw and seed hulls, leftover material from making wood products, and trees killed by pest outbreaks. When used at levels that protect natural cycles and future production, these sources are not enough to replace current petroleum use in transportation. But they might be enough to replace non-renewable fuels for electrical generation, Mabee tells me, providing the “dispatchable” energy generation we need to cover times when solar and wind are not available.

Then, if combined with CCS, bioenergy could convert our electrical generation from a large source of emissions (especially in Western Canada, where coal-fired energy generation is common) to a potential pathway for negative emissions.

### CARBON-NEUTRAL CONTRAILS?

As I was finishing up my research for this story, still not convinced that negative emissions technologies could develop soon enough or expand fast and far enough to get us back to safety, news broke of another tool that might help us succeed.

While BECCS seized attention by proposing a Hail Mary from the plant world, some researchers kept working on the possibility of an industrial process to pull CO<sub>2</sub> directly from

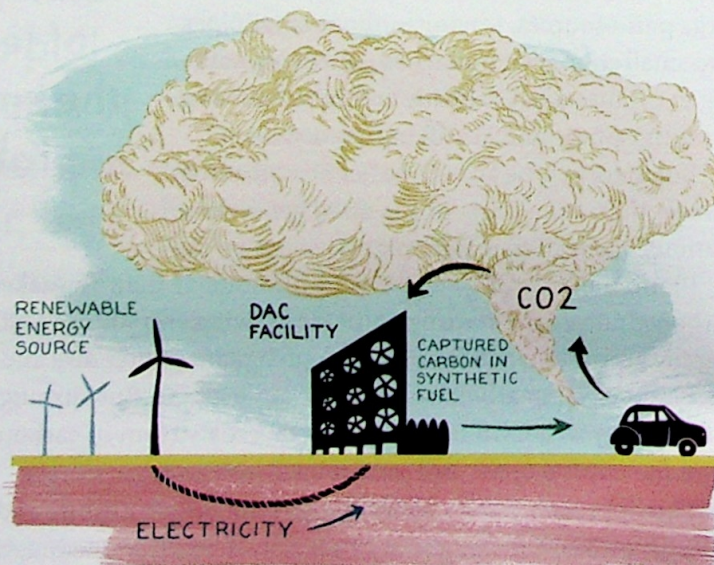
the air – called direct-air capture, or DAC. In June 2018, British Columbia-based company Carbon Engineering published detailed results from a year of tests at their pilot plant in Squamish, suggesting that commercial facilities are within reach.

At the pilot plant, a large fan draws air through plastic packing material covered with a thin, flowing film of alkaline liquid. The liquid captures carbon from the air. At the commercial scale, a whole bank of these fans and “air contactors” would dominate the facility visually. The rest of the process happens in tanks and vessels, where the carbon comes out of the liquid that captured it onto pellets of calcium carbonate, and then heat drives CO<sub>2</sub> off these pellets. The air contactors lose water through evaporation, and the heating takes energy, but otherwise the process is a closed loop with reused chemicals.

Based on their year of testing, Carbon Engineering reports that they can capture carbon at a fraction of the cost from earlier projections: between \$94 and \$232 per tonne, instead of \$600. In an interview, chief executive officer Steve Oldham told me they would start supplying captured CO<sub>2</sub> to projects like Aquistore “tomorrow” if governments would set a carbon price high enough.

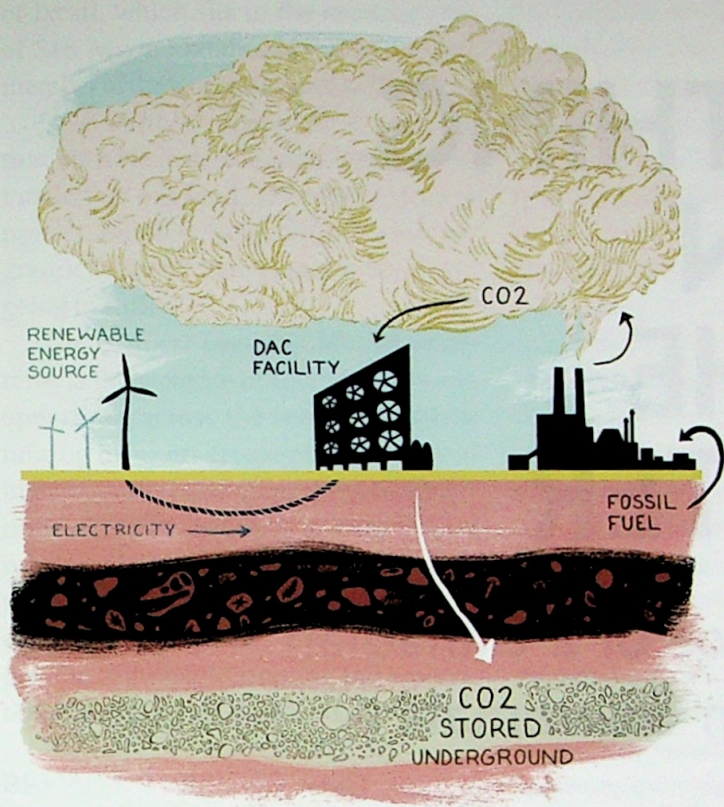
Oldham says if we reach that point, DAC is not bad compared to other options for negative emissions. It requires only water, air, and energy – which can come from renewable sources. It functions “like a very dense forest” (in other words, it needs less land than BECCS). And it can be turned off in an instant when its work is done.

But for the near future, the company is promoting a different application. In December, using captured carbon plus hydrogen electrolyzed from water, the pilot plant produced its first gasoline. That means we now have a liquid fuel that’s neither releasing fossil carbon nor competing for agricultural land, and



### DIRECT AIR CAPTURE (DAC) AND FUEL PRODUCTION





## DIRECT AIR CAPTURE (DAC) AND STORAGE

can be used in existing vehicles. In commercial production, Carbon Engineering expects this fuel to cost less than \$1.00 per litre to make. That's still higher than conventional gasoline, but with the federal carbon tax planned to add 11.6 cents per litre at the pump by 2022, it starts to look competitive. In the future, the company expects to be able to make jet fuel, as well.

I asked Oldham whether their new gasoline would be truly carbon neutral, or whether a DAC facility, competing for limited sources of renewable energy, might indirectly keep other fossil fuel facilities operating. He told me DAC facilities could be built next to entirely new energy facilities, located where resources like sun and wind are plentiful but local demand for electricity is low. The company plans to license the process to partners worldwide, to speed its adoption.

## ACTION NOW

I heard the good news about Carbon Engineering's success from Keith Stewart, a senior energy strategist with Greenpeace. When I interviewed Tom Green, a policy analyst at the David Suzuki Foundation, he too asked if I'd seen the DAC report. It's the kind of news environmental and political leaders need. Like the broader idea of negative emissions, the DAC story could boost public confidence that climate action could still succeed – and should still have our support.

On the other hand, no matter how promising a new technology looks, we have to continue – and intensify – existing efforts. Even Oldham says DAC technology is "part of the

solution. It's not a panacea." DAC will need renewable energy, which is already in demand to replace fossil fuels. BECCS will need land, which must not come at the cost of biodiversity and the consent of Indigenous peoples, from whom far too much land has been stolen already. And neither DAC nor bioenergy can create substantial negative emissions without a lot more facilities to inject the captured carbon back underground.

Instead of waiting for a breakthrough, Green says, politicians need to remember that the sooner they act, the safer we will be. "Let's say we go over our carbon budget, and we emit too much, and we're above the level we should be for, let's say 40 years." Even if technology eventually brings levels back down, he says, "that's not the same as never going over." In the meantime, the excess CO<sub>2</sub> would still be causing harm such as extreme weather and ocean acidification. And removing it later might still fail to halt runaway warming.

Green says scientific models call for negative emissions, not because they're a sure thing, but because we've neglected other options. Models predict a future that assumes "ever-rising energy demand," the authors of a recent study in *Nature* wrote, but we could choose a low-energy path instead, with a rapid transition to renewables, and thus dramatically reduce emissions.

In other words, we still have room to change course.

"We created these problems by going too far, too fast," Stewart says. "The solution is not to go farther, faster." ★



**LAURA STEWART** grew up on a small cattle farm in southeast Saskatchewan, studied biology and geography, and surveyed native prairie plants for oilfield project reviews, before turning to activism and journalism. She is the 2017 Magazines Canada Fellow.

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# SOMETHING IN THE WATER

The lasting violence of a Canadian  
mining giant in Guatemala

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY JEFF ABBOTT

A 20-minute drive from the centre of San Miguel Ixtahuacán, in the western highlands of Guatemala, sits an open wound.

Giant holes scar the earth where two open-air mines, owned by the Canadian company Goldcorp, lay. What we can't see is some additional 147 kilometres of tunnels snaking beneath the ground. In the distance is the processing plant, where the company sifted through millions of tons of earth to extract the gold that lay under the Indigenous Maya

Mam and Maya Sipakapense communities of the department of San Marcos. Now, as the company is in the process of closing the mine, the plant remains a hub of activity.

"Twenty years ago, this was a mountain," Humberto Velásquez, a Maya Mam resident of San Miguel Ixtahuacán and

member of the resistance to the Marlin mine, tells me as we stand over one of the pits. The pieces of construction equipment down below look like tiny toys. Nearby, a truck from the Guatemalan National Police sits empty as four officers stand in the brush on the other side of the road.

Velásquez comments, "It is amazing,

Ixtahuacán blocked the entrance to the mine with tires, rocks, and their own bodies, insisting on a dialogue with the company to address damages to their community – the environmental effects, houses damaged by explosions, and the health impacts caused by production at the site. According to members of the resist-

ance like Velásquez, the protests escalated after three government-mediated meetings between protesters and the company between April and June 2017, in which Goldcorp refused to pay for damages.

"Our demand at the

protest was that the [company] has to pay for everything they have left in our community," says Velásquez as we drive around the community. "They have to pay for the impacts to the water, [our] health, and the tunnels they have left."

Francisca Pascual is a 57-year-old Maya Mam resident who was born in the village

**"OUR ANCESTORS LEFT US THIS LAND. THEY LEFT IT TO US TO PROTECT. BUT NOW, WHAT WILL WE LEAVE OUR GRANDCHILDREN? OUR GRANDCHILDREN ARE GOING TO SUFFER."**

even after the mine closes, the police are still protecting the company."

In February 2017, Goldcorp announced that the company was closing the controversial Marlin mine – Guatemala's first large-scale gold mine – after 12 years of production. In the month following the announcement, residents of San Miguel



of Ixcail, which sits in the municipality of San Miguel Ixtahuacán, and she is a member of the local resistance to the mine.

"We want to recuperate everything that we have lost," she says. "Our ancestors left us this land. They left it to us to protect. But now, what will we leave our grandchildren? Our grandchildren are going to suffer."

The conflict over the Marlin mine reflects the violence of Canadian mining operations across the world. Canadian mining firms are frequently the cause of intense social conflict over resource extraction — from the murders at Banro's gold mines in the Congo to gang rapes by security personnel at Hudbay's nickel mines in eastern Guatemala. It's estimated that 75 per cent of the world's mining and exploration companies are based in Canada.

## BETWEEN PROFITS AND INVESTMENTS

Since Goldcorp acquired Glamis Gold and its Guatemalan subsidiary, Montana

Exploradora, in 2006, the Marlin mine has been incredibly profitable for the company and its investors. Between 2006 and 2010, the highlands of western Guatemala generated over \$594.3 million in profits from the exploitation of the Marlin site. As international gold prices rose, so too did Goldcorp's earnings. In 2013 alone, the mine generated \$447 million.

Goldcorp has maintained that they are dedicated to resolving the social conflicts in the area around the mine as part of their corporate social responsibility policy. According to the company, \$130 million was invested in infrastructure projects across the region since the beginning of the mine's operations — which included paving roads, providing communities with potable water, and building infrastructure at the mining site. But the latter is in service of the mine, not the local communities, and served as a point of contention when power lines were run across private lands.

"The only development that arrived

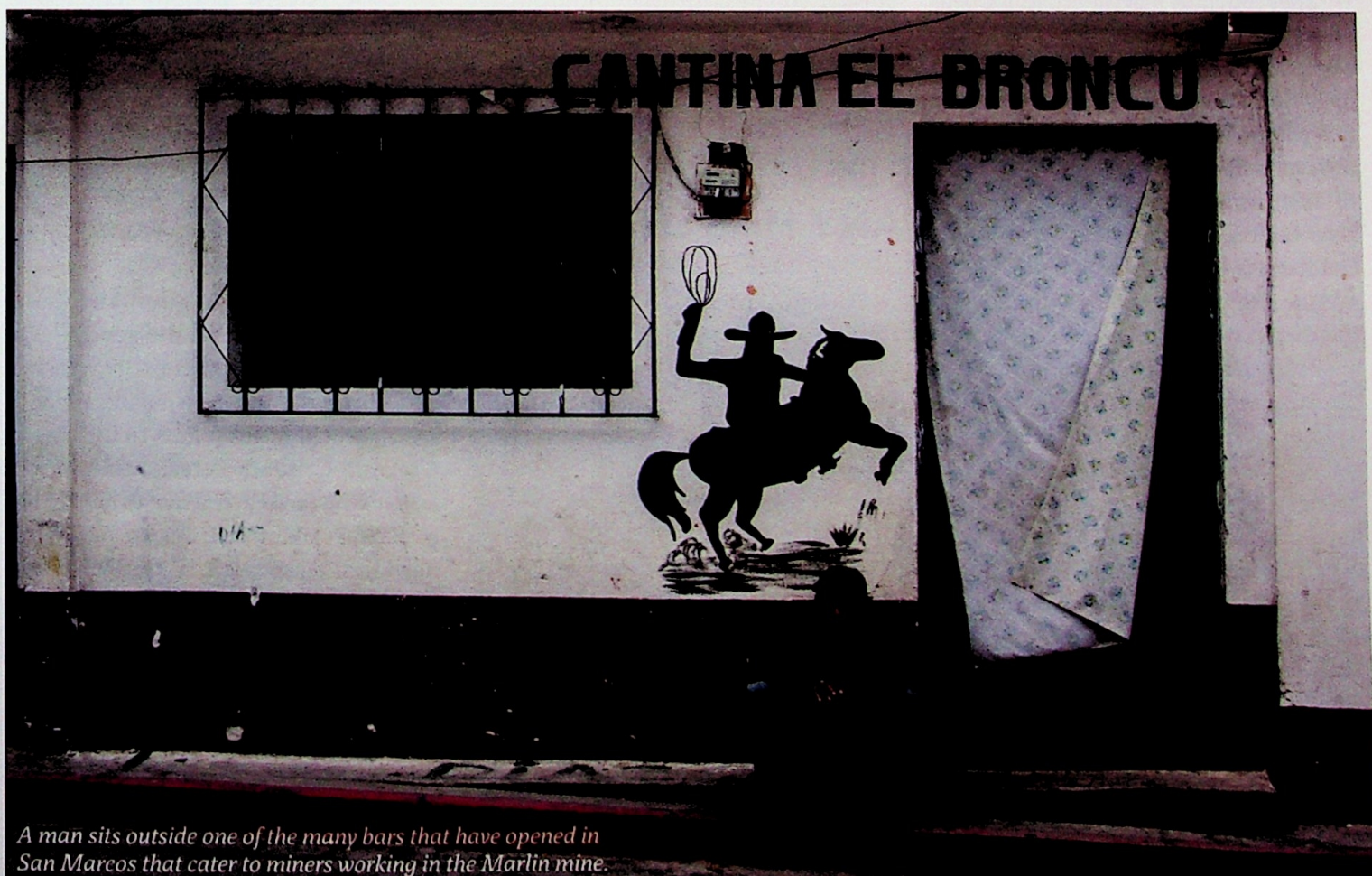
stayed only with them," notes Margarita Sebastian Castellan de Leon, a 32-year-old community leader and a current auxiliary mayor of the village Chilive, which sits to the west of the mine. "The company managed to pave some roads, improve some schools, what else? In my community, we have not had a potable water project until now."

Castellan de Leon says that residents were largely left out of the conversation about how to allocate the funds.

Researchers and community members point out that even though 97 per cent of the mine's 1,582 employees were Guatemalan residents, only a tiny fraction of Goldcorp's money has trickled down to the community.

"The mine is leaving practically nothing," laments Julio González, an activist from the environmentalist collective Madre Selva. "If you look at the people who live around the mine, they have very little, and a profound social division."

"[The Marlin mine] is generating



*A man sits outside one of the many bars that have opened in San Marcos that cater to miners working in the Marlin mine.*





The site of the Marlin mine.

significant economic benefits in the operating phase in the form of wages in highly impoverished, subsistence-based local communities," write Lyuba Zarsky and Leonardo Stanley in a report for Tufts University. "However, local benefits are a tiny fraction of total mine revenues and earnings, the bulk of which flow overseas to the company and its shareholders."

They conclude that the economic benefit will abruptly cease and all evidence of economic development will disappear once the mine closes because Goldcorp failed to invest the revenues in sustainable industry.

International experts also raise concerns that Goldcorp is not closing the mining site in compliance with industry standards. A report from 2011, prepared by international mining and engineering experts, noted that the reclamation bond of only \$1 million that the company paid to the Guatemalan government was "trivial" in comparison to international standards. The document estimated that the actual cost of the reclamation would be \$49 million. The report also flagged that since the reclamation plan has not been made public, it lacks oversight that would guarantee proper closure of the site and therefore poses the additional threat of environmental contamination.

Goldcorp has left a trail of contaminated water and land in the wake of their prior mine closures. In 2009, a year after

Goldcorp closed their San Martín mine in Honduras, an independent review of that shutdown raised concerns about the threat of acidic runoff due to the secretive nature of the reclamation plan and the potential for improper closure of the site.

Those concerns proved true in 2011 when it was revealed that the Honduran government had been covering up widespread sickness in the communities around the old mine. Residents showed high levels of arsenic and lead in their blood and urine.

## "THE DEVELOPMENT THAT THE COMPANY HAS LEFT IS SICKNESS."

Back in Guatemala, the lack of transparency of Goldcorp's plan for closing the Marlin mine raised red flags in the community. Many residents tell me that they do not believe that the mine is actually closing, or speculate that it might just be moving to another site.

"I've heard that they are going to close the mine, but I don't know if they are going to close or continue working," says Pascual.

### LEAVING A DIVIDED COMMUNITY

Goldcorp is also walking away from deep social divisions that they created in the once tight-knit Indigenous communities of San Miguel Ixtahuacán

and surrounding areas. The mine has driven a wedge between supporters of the project and those who are concerned about the impacts of the mine.

"Little by little they divided the community, the churches, the municipality, and even the catechists [of the Catholic Church]," explains Pascual. "This is horrible for us." These social divisions have turned deadly. In 2005, Álvaro Benigno Sanchez, a 23-year-old resident of the village Pie de la Cuesta, Sipacapa, was shot near his home by security guards of the mining

site. Another attack occurred in 2009, when workers from the mine burned an anti-mining activist to death.

In order to dismantle the resistance movement, the government issued arrest warrants for activists protesting the mine, accusing them of sabotage. González points to the case of Gregoria Crisanta Perez, a community leader who faced arrest due to her refusal to permit electric lines to pass over her land. According to González, the criminalization of activists in San Miguel Ixtahuacán set the precedent for how the state responds to other social conflicts in Guatemala. The Public Prosecutor's office has since routinely filed criminal charges against leaders of social movements – such as Rigoberto Juárez Mateo and Domingo Baltazar, two community leaders in Huehuetenango who were



detained and charged with instigating criminal activity in 2015.

The mine has also disrupted the social organization of Indigenous communities, often eroding residents' sense of collective responsibility to the community. This has especially affected the practice of communal work that is foundational to Indigenous communities across Guatemala.

"The company taught the people that when there was a project in the community, such as a school or community salon, that they would be paid [for their work]," says Velásquez as we drive to one of the villages near the mining site. "Before, people would provide their time and work together. Now the people think that they should be paid when we go to repair or clean a road."

On the national level, critics of the mine point out that Goldcorp and the mining sector in general have perpetuated corruption, including embezzlement and bribery, in the Guatemalan political system. In 2016, the Guatemalan Public Prosecutor's office issued an arrest warrant for Eduardo Villacorta, the former Goldcorp senior vice-president for Central and South America. Villacorta is accused of being one of the illicit financiers of the 2011 campaign of Guatemala's former president, Pérez Molina, and his Partido Patriota (Patriotic Party, a conservative political party in Guatemala). The Partido Patriota was cancelled following the arrest and prosecution of Molina for overseeing a criminal network that stole millions from the Guatemalan government.

It's because of such corruption, critics say, that the company has faced little regulation and oversight of the mining location.

"The expansion of mining firms in the country is one of the pillars of corruption in Guatemala. This is one of the major impacts of the mining sector," says González.

## WELLS RUN DRY

San Miguel Ixtahuacán sits along the Cuilco River, which feeds into southern Mexico. The region was once known as Tejutla and is famous for being an abundant source of water. Yet the mining operation guzzled over 250,000 litres of water per hour – far greater than the amount a family will use in 20 years. Soon after, wells began to run dry across the region.

"At least 28 water sources have dried up," explains Velásquez. "The families have no place to get water. They have no

**"AT LEAST 28 WATER SOURCES  
HAVE DRIED UP. THE FAMILIES  
HAVE NO PLACE TO GET WATER.  
THEY HAVE NO WATER TO DRINK,  
OR FOR THEIR ANIMALS."**

water to drink, or for their animals."

At the height of production, Goldcorp was importing 200 tonnes of cyanide a month for gold processing. The Catholic Church and residents have long accused the mine of poorly managing waste at the mining site, threatening the surrounding communities with cyanide contamination in the water. According to the company, the cyanide facilities at the Marlin mine have been decommissioned following international standards

and protocols.

"We heard that the company was going to bring development, but this is a bunch of lies, as we have never seen development," says Pascual. "The development that the company has left is sickness."

As frustration grew over the lack of access to water and rampant human rights abuses, the communities took the mine to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). In 2010, the commission ordered the Guatemalan government to suspend the mine's licence due to concerns of environmental contamination.

In addition, the commission asked the Guatemalan government to decontaminate the water sources of the 18 beneficiary communities and to ensure their members access to water, as well as "to adopt any other necessary measures to guarantee the life and physical integrity of the members of the 18 aforementioned Maya communities."

The next year, the IACHR would withdraw their orders for the closure of the mine following intense pressure from Goldcorp. In their revised decision, the IACHR ordered the Guatemalan state to further guarantee access to clean water. In





response to these orders, Goldcorp began to construct potable water systems in several communities. The company and the Guatemalan government have also taken steps to monitor communities' water.

Yet this has not calmed the concerns of residents. In 2012, a resident near the mining site took her animals to drink from the Cuilco River, and on the way home her animals began to vomit and eventually died. Six years later, the Pastoral Commission for Peace and Ecology (COPAE) issued a study of water quality to coincide with the closure of the mine. Their findings revealed high levels of toxic metals in the three rivers in the region, and stated that the water is not fit for human or animal consumption

– or even irrigation – due to the levels of contamination.

Today, residents look upon the rivers and other water sources with suspicion.

"Many people close to the mine have grown sick, in part because they avoid bathing due to the lack of confidence with the water," says Castellan de Leon. "Why? Because the mine has led to the contamination of our water, and because the many springs have disappeared."

Unfortunately, the businesses that have benefited most from the mining activities in San Miguel Ixtahuacán are apparent in the town centres. Cantinas, or small bars, dominate nearly every street, with names such as "Gift from God" and "The Miracle." Velásquez estimates there

are at least 128 cantinas that have opened across town since 2005. The rampant consumption of alcohol by workers has proven to be a frustration for the Maya Mam community.

"This is the type of development that the mine has brought," Velásquez explains to me as we drive through town. "The mine workers cash their cheques and go and buy alcoholic drinks." ★



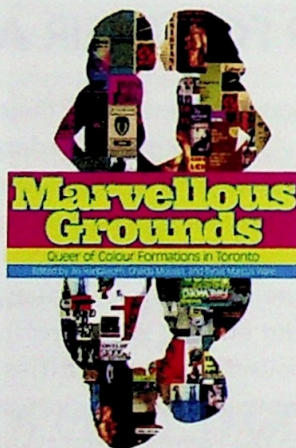
JEFF ABBOTT is an independent journalist currently based out of Guatemala. His work has appeared at the *Progressive*, *In These Times*, and *North American Congress on Latin America*. Follow him on Twitter @palabrasdebajo.

## Marvellous Grounds: Queer of Colour Formations in Toronto

Edited by Jin Haritaworn, Ghaida Moussa, and Syrus Marcus Ware

Between The Lines Press, October 2018

REVIEWED BY SHAINA AGBAYANI



In front of the old Second Cup on Church Street, you could find the Steps. There, many of Tkaronto's<sup>1</sup> young queer and trans Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (QTBIPOC) gathered.

"The Steps were meaningful precisely because they existed without an imposed meaning. They functioned in the way they did because of who was using them," writes Asam Ahmad, in his essay "Queer Circuits of Belonging." At the time, city planners and politicians were biting off chunks of the Gay Village, chewing them up and spitting them out sanitized. In 2005, the Steps were demolished – they were one of the final holdouts against

the gentrification that would reserve the Village for its "neoliberal white gay consumer citizens," write the editors of *Marvellous Grounds*.

It is summer 2013. I am 21 going on lesbian lola,<sup>2</sup> never having heard of the Steps. I am a Scarborough-born filipinx femme, glitter ready to gleam with the melanin queers of Tkaronto. I have discovered QTBIPOC *scenes*, but what I really seek is queer community and ancestors who share commitment to long-term, intergenerational care.

*Marvellous Grounds* is a map of queer and trans ancestry and freedom-making in Tkaronto that I would have loved to access back then. The book covers over four decades of QTBIPOC history in personal

essays, interviews, research articles, and poetry organized into three key themes: counter-archives, cartographies of violence, and community healing. Authors offer snapshots of QTBIPOC movements, like those of trans women of colour and sex worker activism in the '80s and '90s; glimpses of (r)evolutionary creative projects such as Colour Me DRAGG, a QTBIPOC cabaret-style showcase that ran from 2006 to 2011; they also pay homage to spaces such as Unit 2, a DIT (do-it-together) community hub for artists, performers, and facilitators. Alongside the book, *Marvellous Grounds* has a web-based component that allows users to mark their moments of QTBIPOC joy, grief, rage, and connection on an online map of the city.

*Marvellous Grounds* gifts readers with a rich archive of QTBIPOC stories of struggle, conflict, kinship, and care-making – offering a meaningful alternative to the "curatorial approach that 'collects' QTBIPOC objects and subjects for an ever more colourful archive whose foundations remain firmly white," as the editors explain in their introduction.

Through the experiences of contributors such as Ahmad, who reflects on homelessness in Tkaronto in the process of navigating queer kinship and mentorship, we are reminded that while many QTBIPOC are invested in freedom-making, our bodies are

<sup>1</sup> The word Toronto comes from the Kanien'kehá:ka word tkaronto, which means "where there are trees in the water."

<sup>2</sup> The Tagalog word for grandmother.



often still dancing sites between choice and circumstance. Shaunga Tagore similarly reflects on the interplay between agency and inheritance in "A Love Letter to These Marvellous Grounds." She professes, "I do not need to hold this trauma in my body in order to honour who gave it to me." Her essay celebrates QTBIPOC bodies as placeholders of memory, where healing can occur not only through preservation, but also through movement. It reminds me of Palestinian filmmaker Nasrin Himada's explanation, at a show this spring near Lansdowne, that nostalgia can be kinesthetic, transmuting memory into movement.

When I agreed to review *Marvellous Grounds*, I didn't realize that I knew any of the contributors except Jin Haritaworn, one of the three editors. I met Jin at the Cutie.BPoC Festival in Berlin in 2015, where they were co-guiding a discussion on community care. Once I opened the book, I realized I'd met 15 of the contributors, all

in the context of BIPOC community work in different parts of the world. For me, this is evidence of Tkaronto as a rich translocal hub for QTBIPOC community work.

Amid all this richness, one thing deserves more focus in *Marvellous*

## MARVELLOUS GROUNDS IS ROMANTIC, WITHOUT ROMANTICIZING THE STRUGGLE.

*Grounds*: Tkaronto's Indigenous herstories. The editors note in the introduction that "it is impossible [...] to read the current archive without investigating, in its creases, whose work has been pilaged, whose land has been stolen, who has been lost or left behind, murdered or displaced, erased or deemed disposable." In a compilation so intimately place-based, there certainly could have been

more space dedicated to the legacies and presence of two-spirited and Indigenous folks more broadly in Tkaronto, and to unpacking how anti-Indigeneity, settler colonialism, and Indigenous erasure exists within QTPOC communities.

More than simply a static archive, *Marvellous Grounds* is a call for QTBIPOC to step into a "permanent readiness for the marvellous," a phrase the book borrows from Martinique-born scholar and activist Suzanne Césaire's description of surrealism. This archive marvels not only at the love, generosity, and care between QTBIPOC folks of Tkaronto, but also on communal tears shed for lives lost at the hands of structural violence. As such, *Marvellous Grounds* is romantic, without romanticizing the struggle. ★


SHAINA AGBAYANI is a queerest filipinx conjurer of rootcare and pagsibol, grateful to be based in Dish With One Spoon treaty territory.

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## SUSTAINER PROFILE #52

### AIDAN CONWAY



Aidan Conway lives in Regina, where he is happily a new father. In addition, he is a researcher and policy analyst for the Saskatchewan Union of Nurses. Aidan sits on *Briarpatch*'s board of directors.

#### When did you first hear about *Briarpatch*?

I can't remember the first time I heard about *Briarpatch* because I can't remember a time before I knew about *Briarpatch*. I was born and raised in Regina, and grew up just a few blocks from the magazine's offices. I like to say I am a third generation *Briarpatch* subscriber and supporter. The magazine was, quite literally, lying around my parents' and grandparents' homes for as long as I can remember.

#### What does a research and policy analyst in the labour movement do?

First and foremost I see myself as a civil servant for the members of the union and their elected leadership. I provide research support for the full range of the union's activities. Recent examples include a study of patient needs and nurse workloads in Regina's emergency departments, and making submissions to the provincial government on paid employment leaves for victims of domestic violence and for family caregivers.

#### What do you appreciate about *Briarpatch*, and why are you a sustainer?

*Briarpatch* is unique and valuable because it combines the fact-finding and muckraking of good journalism with a space to evaluate the longer-term successes, failures, and prospects of our movements. Documenting and denouncing injustices has to be combined with reflection and analysis about the tactics, strategies, and alliances necessary to overcome them. *Briarpatch* is well-placed to encourage and host some of those conversations, and that makes it a small but vital lamp illuminating the path as we stumble towards a better world. Sustaining it through a monthly donation is my way of helping to keep the lights on. I hope you will join me.



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# The lie of anti-consumerism

We do not need to consume less – what we need is democratic and sustainable consumption

For years, we've been told by well-intentioned environmentalists that "consumerism" in the Global North is the culprit for everything from climate change to environmental degradation to global poverty.

It's a narrative that becomes deafening around Earth Hour – when people are encouraged to switch off their lights for an hour – and Earth Day, which this year focused on ending plastic pollution. Then there's Adbusters' Buy Nothing Day, Banksy stencils, television's Mr. Robot, and the obnoxiously large assortment of documentaries about minimalism.

Here's the thing: consuming things is actually extremely good. We do not need people to consume less.

In fact, the very concept of "reducing consumption" presupposes that most people in Canada and elsewhere have consumption habits that can somehow be reduced. In the era of stagnant wages, increasingly precarious work, and eroding public services, it's a noxious, tone-deaf, and fundamentally reactionary concept that absolves capitalism of its crimes – and should quickly be banished from serious leftist discourse.

There is nothing inherently wrong with the consumption of energy and materials. The problem is that consumption is largely undemocratic, exploitative, and unsustainable: all realities that can be dramatically altered.

We know that many socially destructive sectors consume a vast chunk of resources. For example, the U.S. military is the institution which consumes the greatest amount of oil in the world. At last count, over half of the energy used in Canada was consumed by the industrial sector – the likes of mines, factories, and fossil fuel extraction. A 2011 study by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives concluded that the top one per cent of income earners in B.C. emitted almost six times the amount of carbon pollution as residents in the bottom 10 per cent.

And corporations have created a status quo of obscene food waste, planned obsolescence, and entrenched fossil fuel interests that obstruct a rapid transition to low-carbon communities.

None of this has anything to do with the consumption habits of regular people: the worker who buys a discounted television at Walmart in order to find a few hours of relaxation from deeply alienating and underpaid labour isn't the driving force behind the system that's killing us and the planet.

This isn't to suggest that nothing needs to change, or that we shouldn't be cognizant of our personal impacts on our surroundings. Overall, North Americans probably should eat less meat and reduce air travel when possible. Incessant corporate branding and marketing almost certainly has a toxic impact on our psyches, encouraging us to buy new products instead of repairing and

sharing existing stuff. But until regular people have the ability to collectively decide what goods are produced and services delivered, they shouldn't be held responsible for "choices" forced upon them.

Most people would likely choose to take sleek, quiet, and reliable public transit over spending hours each day sitting in gridlock, alone in their cars. But the former is simply not an option in many North American cities, which have experienced years of neglected transit and accumulated (usually racist) infrastructure underinvestment.

Same goes for living close to work, or residing in energy-efficient homes, or purchasing goods with less plastic packaging, or travelling across the country in high-speed rail rather than discount airlines. Decades of political decisions and reductions in regulations have resulted in those options being an impossibility except for the most affluent in society, who then get to moralize to the rest of us about how Inherently Good it is to not

live in the suburbs or shop at big-box stores.

The solution, as with everything, is political.

We must abandon the language and sentiment of overconsumption and organize our cities and towns through unions, co-ops, community centres, and activist organizations –

with a primary focus on improving conditions and services in low-income communities of colour.

This means building energy-efficient and affordable housing, ensuring that people can work and relax in the areas in which they live, while using low-cost public transit to get elsewhere.

We already know that massive amounts of energy can be generated via low-carbon sources: wind, solar, geothermal, and more. By agitating for publicly owned electricity production by such means, our communities can significantly reduce the amount of carbon pollution emitted for basic functions such as transportation, building heating, air conditioning, and the industry we deem as socially beneficial.

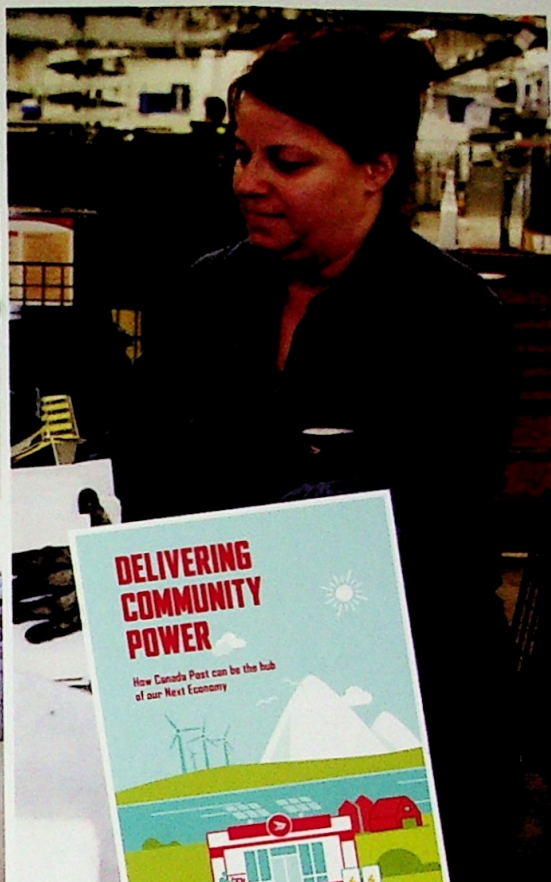
The so-called problem of consumption is a convenient distraction from the hard work that needs to be done to overhaul the exploitative and destructive systems that currently concentrate a vast majority of the wealth and power in the hands of the very few. Such greed won't dissipate by individual moralizing or using fewer plastic bags.

It'll take radical collective action – and an impassioned desire for all of us to be able to consume more of the things that are sustainable, just, and fulfilling. ★



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